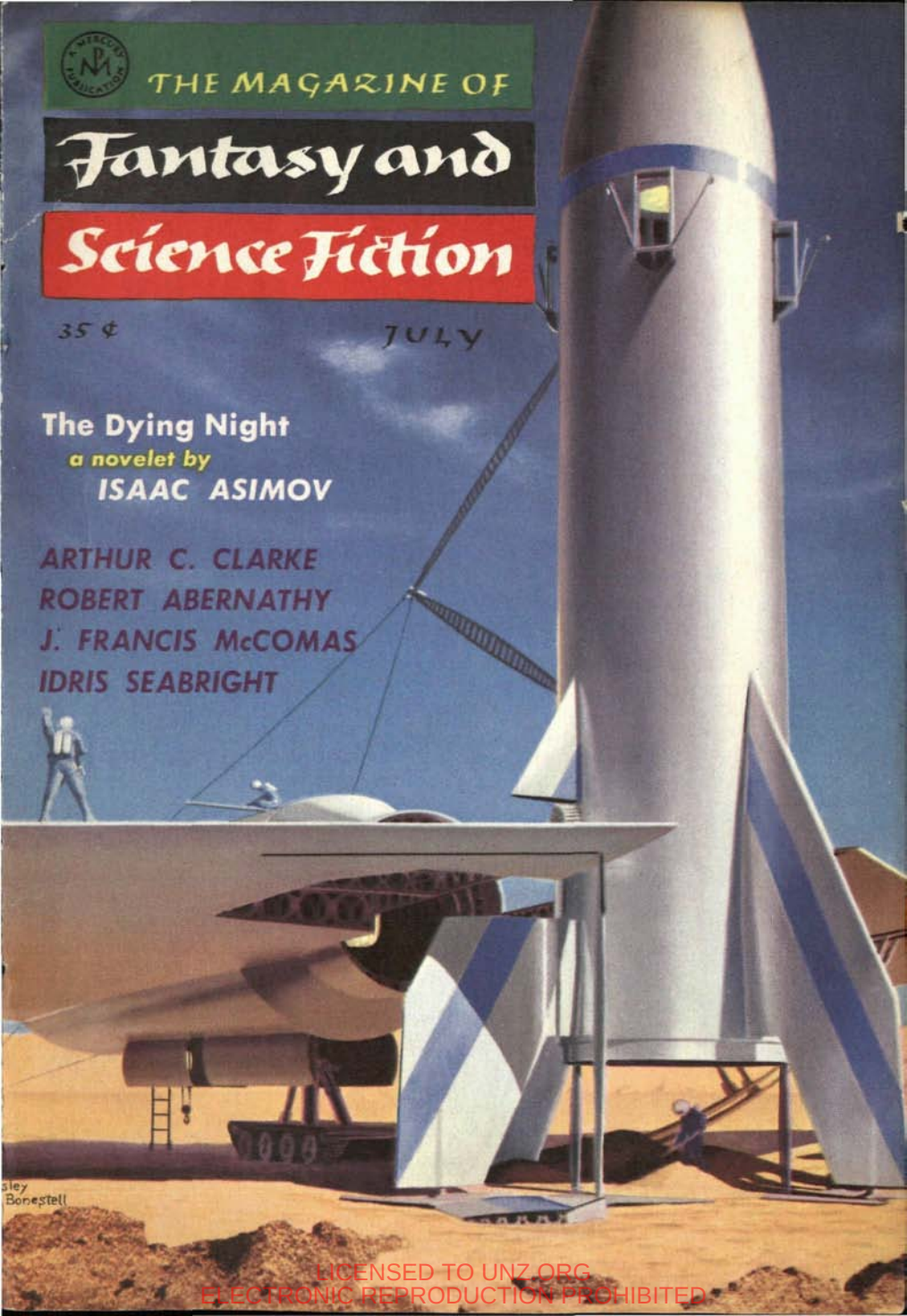

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 11, No. 1 JULY

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COVER PAINTING BY CHESLEY BONESTELL

(*Pulling Rocket Into Upright Position for Takeoff. Painting from "The Exploration of Mars," by Werner von Braun, Willy Ley, and Chesley Bonestell, to be published by The Viking Press.*)

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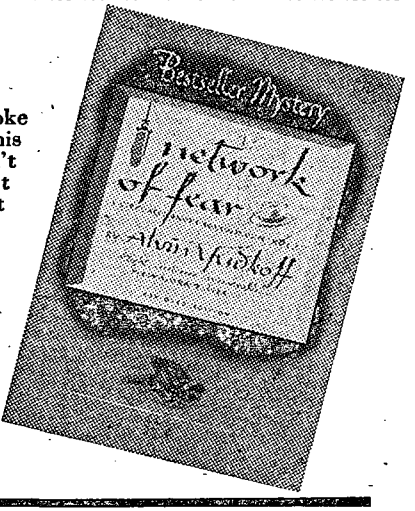

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The Dying Night

by ISAAC ASIMOV

IT WAS ALMOST A CLASS REUNION, and though it was marked by joylessness, there was no reason as yet to think it would be marred by tragedy.

Edward Talliaferro, fresh from the Moon and without his gravity legs yet, met the other two in Stanley Kaunas' room. Kaunas rose to greet him in a subdued manner. Battersley Ryger merely sat and nodded.

Talliaferro lowered his large body carefully to the couch, very aware of its unaccustomed weight. He grimaced a little, his plump lips twisting inside the rim of hair that surrounded them on lip, chin and cheek.

They had seen one another earlier that day under more formal conditions. Now for the first time they were alone and Talliaferro said, "This is a kind of occasion. We're meeting for the first time in ten years. First time since graduation in fact."

Ryger's nose twitched. It had been broken shortly before that same graduation and he had received his degree in astronomy with a bandage disfiguring his face. He said, grumpily, "Anyone ordered champagne? Or something?"

Talliaferro said, "Come on! First big interplanetary astronomical convention in history is no place for glooming. And among friends, too!"

Kaunas said suddenly. "It's Earth. It doesn't feel right. I can't get used to it." He shook his head but his look of depression remained.

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Talliaferro said, "I know. I'm so heavy. It takes all the energy out of me. At that, you're better off than I am, Kaunas. Mercurian gravity is 0.4 normal. On the Moon, it's only 0.16." He interrupted Ryger's beginning of a sound by saying, "And on Ceres they use pseudo-grav fields adjusted to 0.8. You have no problems at all, Ryger."

The Cerian astronomer looked annoyed. "It's the open air. Going outside without a suit gets me."

"Right," agreed Kaunas. "And letting the sun beat down on you. Just letting it."

Talliaferro found himself insensibly drifting back in time. They had not changed much. Nor, he thought, had he himself. They were all ten years older, of course. Ryger had put on some weight and Kaunas' thin face had grown a bit leathery, but he would have recognized either if he had met him without warning.

He said, "I don't think it's Earth getting us. Let's face it."

Kaunas looked up sharply. He was a little fellow with quick, nervous movements of his hands and habitually wore clothes that looked a shade too large for him.

He said, "Villiers! I know. I think about him sometimes." Then, with an air of desperation, "I got a letter from him."

Ryger sat upright, his olive complexion darkening further, and said with energy, "You did? When?"

"A month ago."

Ryger turned to Talliaferro. "How about you?"

Talliaferro blinked placidly and nodded.

Ryger said, "He's gone crazy. He claims he's discovered a practical method of mass-transference through space. — He told you two also? — That's it, then. He was always a little bent. Now he's broken."

He rubbed his nose fiercely and Talliaferro thought of the day Villiers had broken it.

For ten years, Villiers had haunted them like the vague shadow of a guilt that wasn't really theirs. They had gone through their graduate work together, four picked and dedicated men being trained for a profession that had reached new heights in this age of interplanetary travel.

The Observatories were opening on the other worlds, surrounded by vacuum, unblurred by air.

There was the Lunar Observatory, from which Earth and the inner planets could be studied; a silent world in whose sky the home-planet hung suspended.

Mercury Observatory, closest to the sun, perched at Mercury's north pole, where the terminator moved scarcely at all, and the sun was fixed on the horizon and could be studied in the minutest detail.

Ceres Observatory, newest, most modern, with its range extending from Jupiter to the outermost galaxies.

There were disadvantages, of

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course. With interplanetary travel still difficult, leaves would be few, anything like normal life virtually impossible, but this was a lucky generation. Coming scientists would find the fields of knowledge well-reaped and, until the invention of an interstellar drive, no new horizon as capacious as this one would be opened.

These lucky four, Talliaferro, Ryger, Kaunas and Villiers, were to be in the position of a Galileo, who, by virtue of owning the first real telescope, could not point it anywhere in the sky without making a major discovery.

But then Romano Villiers had fallen sick and it was rheumatic fever. Whose fault was that? His heart had been left leaking and limping.

He was the most brilliant of the four, the most hopeful, the most intense — and he could not even finish his schooling and get his doctorate.

Worse than that, he could never leave Earth; the acceleration of a spaceship's takeoff would kill him.

Talliaferro was marked for the Moon, Ryger for Ceres, Kaunas for Mercury. Only Villiers stayed behind, a life-prisoner of Earth.

They had tried telling their pity and Villiers had rejected it with something approaching hate. He had railed at them and cursed them. When Ryger lost his temper and lifted his fist, Villiers had sprung at him screaming and broken his nose.

Obviously, Ryger hadn't forgotten that, as he caressed his nose gingerly with one finger.

Kaunas' forehead was an uncertain washboard of wrinkles. "He's at the Convention, you know. He's got a room in the hotel. 405."

"*I* won't see him," said Ryger.

"He's coming up here. He said he wanted to see us. I thought — He said 9. He'll be here any minute."

"In that case," said Ryger, "if you don't mind, I'm leaving."

Talliaferro said, "Oh, wait a while. What's the harm in seeing him?"

"Because there's no point. He's mad."

"Even so. Let's not be petty about it. Are you afraid of him?"

"Afraid!" Ryger looked contemptuous.

"Nervous, then. What is there to be so nervous about?"

"I'm not nervous," said Ryger.

"Sure you are. We all feel guilty about him, and without real reason. Nothing that happened was our fault." But he was speaking defensively and he knew it.

And when, at that point, the door signal sounded, all three jumped and turned to stare uneasily at the barrier that stood between themselves and Villiers.

The door opened and Romano Villiers walked in. The others rose stiffly to greet him, then remained standing in embarrassment, without one hand being raised.

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He stared them down sardonically.

He's changed, thought Talliaferro.

He had. He had shrunk in almost every dimension. A gathering stoop even made him seem shorter. The skin of his scalp glistened through thinning hair, the skin on the back of his hands was ridged crookedly with bluish veins. He looked ill. There seemed nothing to link him to the memory of the past except for his trick of shading his eyes with one hand when he stared intently and, when he spoke, the even, controlled baritone of his voice.

He said, "My friends! My space-trotting friends! We've lost touch."

Talliaferro said, "Hello, Villiers."

Villiers eyed him. "Are you well?"

"Well enough."

"And you two?"

Kaunas managed a weak smile and a murmur. Ryger snapped, "All right, Villiers. What's up?"

"Ryger, the angry man," said Villiers. "How's Ceres?"

"It was doing well when I left. How's Earth?"

"You can see for yourself," but Villiers tightened as he said that.

He went on, "I am hoping that the reason all three of you have come to the Convention is to hear my paper day after tomorrow."

"Your paper? What paper?" asked Talliaferro.

"I wrote you all about it. My method of mass-transference."

Ryger smiled with one corner of his mouth. "Yes, you did. You didn't say anything about a paper, though, and I don't recall that you're listed as one of the speakers. I would have noticed it if you had been."

"You're right. I'm not listed. Nor have I prepared an abstract for publication."

Villiers had flushed and Talliaferro said, soothingly, "Take it easy, Villiers. You don't look well."

Villiers whirled on him, lips contorted. "My heart's holding out, thank you."

Kaunas said, "Listen, Villiers, if you're not listed or abstracted —"

"*You* listen. I've waited ten years. You have the jobs in space and I have to teach school on Earth, but I'm a better man than any of you or all of you."

"Granted — " began Talliaferro.

"And I don't want your condescension either. Mandel witnessed it. I suppose you've heard of Mandel. Well, he's chairman of the astronautics division at the Convention and I demonstrated mass-transference for him. It was a crude device and it burnt out after one use but — Are you listening?"

"We're listening," said Ryger coldly. "For what that counts."

"He'll let me talk about it my way. You bet he will. No warning. No advertisement. I'm going to spring it at them like a bombshell. When I give them the fundamental relationships involved it will break up the Convention. They'll

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scatter to their home labs to check on me and build devices. And they'll find it works. I made a live mouse disappear at one spot in my lab and appear in another. Mandel witnessed it."

He stared at them, glaring first at one face, then at another. He said, "You don't believe me, do you?"

Ryger said, "If you don't want advertisement, why do you tell us?"

"You're different. You're my friends, my classmates. You went out into space and left me behind."

"That wasn't a matter of choice," objected Kaunas in a thin, high voice.

Villiers ignored that. He said, "So I want you to know *now*. What will work for a mouse will work for a human. What will move something ten feet across a lab will move it a million miles across space. I'll be on the Moon, *and* on Mercury, *and* on Ceres and anywhere I want to go. I'll match every one of you and more. And I'll have done more for astronomy just teaching school and thinking than all of you with your observatories and telescopes and cameras and spaceships."

"Well," said Talliaferro, "I'm pleased. More power to you. May I see a copy of the paper?"

"Oh, no." Villiers' hands clenched close to his chest as though he were holding phantom sheets and shielding them from observation. "You wait like everyone else. There's only one copy and no one will see it till I'm ready. Not even Mandel."

"One copy!" cried Talliaferro. "If you misplace it —"

"I won't. And if I do, it's all in my head."

"If you —" Talliaferro almost finished that sentence with "die" but stopped himself. Instead, he went on after an almost imperceptible pause, "— have any sense, you'll scan it at least. For safety's sake."

"No," said Villiers, shortly. "You'll hear me day after tomorrow. You'll see the human horizon expanded at one stroke as it never has been before."

Again, he stared intently at each face. "Ten years," he said. "Goodby."

"He's mad," said Ryger explosively, staring at the door as though Villiers were still standing before it.

"Is he?" said Talliaferro thoughtfully. "I suppose he is, in a way. He hates us for irrational reasons. And, then, not even to scan his paper as a precaution —"

Talliaferro fingered his own small scanner as he said that. It was just a neutrally-colored, undistinguished cylinder, somewhat thicker and somewhat shorter than an ordinary pencil. In recent years, it had become the hallmark of the scientist, much as the stethoscope was that of the physician and the microcomputer that of the statistician. The scanner was worn in a jacket pocket, or clipped to a sleeve, or slipped be-

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hind the ear or swung at the end of a string.

Talliaferro sometimes, in his more philosophical moments, wondered how it was in the days when research men had to make laborious notes of the literature or file away full-sized reprints. How unwieldy!

Now it was only necessary to scan anything printed or written to have a micronegative which could be developed at leisure. Talliaferro had already recorded every abstract included in the program booklet of the Convention. The other two, he assumed with full confidence, had done likewise.

Talliaferro said, "Under the circumstances, refusal to scan is mad."

"Space!" said Ryger, hotly. "There is no paper. There is no discovery. Scoring one on us would be worth any lie to him."

"But then what will he do day after tomorrow?" asked Kaunas.

"How do I know? He's a madman."

Talliaferro still played with his scanner and wondered idly if he ought to remove and develop some of the small slivers of film that lay stored away in its vitals. He decided against it. He said, "Don't underestimate Villiers. He's a brain."

"Ten years ago, maybe," said Ryger. "Now he's a nut. I propose we forget him."

He spoke loudly, as though to drive away Villiers and all that concerned him by the sheer force with which he discussed other things. He talked about Ceres and his work — the radio-plotting of the Milky Way with new radioscopes capable of the resolution of single stars.

Kaunas listened and nodded, then chimed in with information concerning the radio emissions of sunspots and his own paper, in press, on the association of proton storms with the gigantic hydrogen flares on the sun's surface.

Talliaferro contributed little. Lunar work was unglamorous in comparison. The latest information on long-scale weather-forecasting through direct observation of terrestrial jet-streams would not compare with radioscopes and proton storms.

More than that, his thoughts could not leave Villiers. Villiers *was* the brain. They all knew it. Even Ryger, for all his bluster, must feel that if mass-transference were at all possible then Villiers was a logical discoverer.

The discussion of their own work amounted to no more than an uneasy admission that none of them had come to much. Talliaferro had followed the literature and knew. His own papers had been minor. The others had authored nothing of great importance.

None of them — face the fact — had developed into space-shakers. The colossal dreams of schooldays had not come true and that was that. They were competent routine workmen. No more than that, they knew.

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Villiers would have been more. They knew that, too. It was that knowledge, as well as guilt, which kept them in antagonism.

Talliaferro felt uneasily that Villiers, despite everything, was yet to *be* more. The others must be thinking so, too, and mediocrity could grow quickly unbearable. The mass-transference paper would come to pass and Villiers would be the great man after all, as he was always fated to be apparently, while his classmates, with all their advantages, would be forgotten. Their role would be no more than to applaud from the crowd.

He felt his own envy and chagrin and was ashamed of it, but felt it nonetheless.

Conversation died, and Kaunas said, his eyes turning away, "Listen, why don't we drop in on old Villiers?"

There was a false heartiness about it, a completely unconvincing effort at casualness. He added, "No use leaving bad feelings —"

Talliaferro thought. He wants to make sure about the mass-transference. He's hoping it *is* only a madman's nightmare so he can sleep tonight.

But he was curious himself, so he made no objection, and even Ryger shrugged with ill grace and said, "Hell, why not?"

It was then a little before eleven.

Talliaferro was awakened by the insistent ringing of his door-signal. He hitched himself to one elbow in the darkness and felt distinctly outraged. The soft glow of the ceiling indicator showed it to be not quite four in the morning.

He cried out, "Who is it?"

The ringing continued in spurts.

Growling, Talliaferro slipped into his bathrobe. He opened the door and blinked in the corridor light. He recognized the man who faced him from the trimensionals he had seen often enough.

Nevertheless the man said in an abrupt whisper, "My name is Hubert Mandel."

"Yes, sir," said Talliaferro. Mandel was one of the Names in astronomy, prominent enough to have an important executive position with the World Astronomical Bureau, active enough to be Chairman of the astronautics section here at the Convention.

It suddenly struck Talliaferro that it was Mandel for whom Villiers claimed to have demonstrated mass-transference. The thought of Villiers was somehow a sobering one.

Mandel said, "You are Dr. Edward Talliaferro?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then dress and come with me. It is very important. It concerns a common acquaintance."

"Dr. Villiers?"

Mandel's eyes flickered a bit. His brows and lashes were so fair as to give those eyes a naked, unfringed appearance. His hair was silky-thin, his age about 50.

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He said, "Why Villiers?"

"He mentioned you last evening. I don't know any other common acquaintance."

Mandel nodded, waited for Talliaferro to finish slipping into his clothes, then turned and led the way. Ryger and Kaunas were waiting in a room one floor above Talliaferro's. Kaunas' eyes were red and troubled. Ryger was smoking a cigarette with impatient puffs.

Talliaferro said, "We're all here. Another reunion." It fell flat.

He took a seat and the three stared at one another. Ryger shrugged.

Mandel paced the floor, hands deep in his pockets. He said, "I apologize for any inconvenience, gentlemen, and I thank you for your cooperation. I would like more of it. Our friend, Romano Villiers, is dead. About an hour ago, his body was removed from the hotel. The medical judgment is heart failure."

There was a stunned silence. Ryger's cigarette hovered halfway to his lips, then sank slowly without completing its journey.

"Poor devil," said Talliaferro.

"Horrible," whispered Kaunas hoarsely. "He was . . ." His voice played out.

Ryger shook himself. "Well, he had a bad heart. There's nothing to be done."

"One little thing," corrected Mandel, quietly. "Recovery."

"What does that mean?" asked Ryger sharply.

Mandel said, "When did you three see him last?"

Talliaferro spoke. "Last evening. It turned out to be a reunion. We all met for the first time in ten years. It wasn't a pleasant meeting, I'm sorry to say. Villiers felt he had cause for anger with us, and he was angry."

"That was — when?"

"About 9, the first time."

"The first time?"

"We saw him again later in the evening."

Kaunas looked troubled. "He had stormed off angrily. We couldn't leave it at that. We had to try. It wasn't as if we hadn't all been friends at one time. So we went to his room and —"

Mandel pounced on that. "You were all in his room?"

"Yes," said Kaunas, surprised.

"About when?"

"Eleven, I think." He looked at the others. Talliaferro nodded.

"And how long did you stay?"

"Two minutes," put in Ryger. "He ordered us out as though we were after his paper." He paused as if expecting Mandel to ask what paper, but Mandel said nothing. He went on. "I think he kept it under his pillow. At least he lay across the pillow as he yelled at us to leave."

"He may have been dying then," said Kaunas, in a sick whisper.

"Not then," said Mandel, shortly. "So you probably all left fingerprints."

"Probably," said Talliaferro. He

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was losing some of his automatic respect for Mandel and a sense of impatience was returning. It *was* four in the morning, Mandel or no. He said, "Now what's all this about?"

"Well, gentlemen," said Mandel, "there's more to Villiers' death than the fact of death. Villiers' paper, the only copy of it as far as I know, was stuffed into the cigarette flash-disposal unit and only scraps of it were left. I've never seen or read the paper, but I knew enough about the matter to be willing to swear in court if necessary that the remnants of unflashed paper in the disposal unit were of the paper he was planning to give at this Convention. — You seem doubtful, Dr. Ryger."

Ryger smiled sourly. "Doubtful that he was going to give it. If you want my opinion, sir, he was mad. For ten years he was a prisoner of Earth and he fantasied mass-transference as escape. It was all that kept him alive probably. He rigged up some sort of fraudulent demonstration. I don't say it was deliberate fraud. He was probably madly sincere, and sincerely mad. Last evening was the climax. He came to our rooms — he hated us for having escaped Earth — and triumphed over us. It was what he had lived for for ten years. It may have shocked him back to some form of sanity. He knew he couldn't actually give the paper; there was nothing to give. So he burned it and his heart gave out. It *is* too bad."

Mandel listened to the Cerian astronomer, wearing a look of sharp disapproval. He said, "Very glib, Dr. Ryger, but quite wrong. I am not so easily fooled by fraudulent demonstrations as you may believe. Now according to the registration data, which I have been forced to check rather hastily, you three were his classmates at college. Is that right?"

They nodded.

"Are there any other classmates of yours present at the Convention?"

"No," said Kaunas. "We were the only four qualifying for a doctorate in astronomy that year. At least he would have qualified except —"

"Yes, I understand," said Mandel. "Well, then, in that case one of you three visited Villiers in his room one last time at midnight."

There was a short silence. Then Ryger said coldly, "Not I." Kaunas, eyes wide, shook his head.

Talliaferro said, "What are you implying?"

"One of you came to him at midnight and insisted on seeing his paper. I don't know the motive. Conceivably, it was with the deliberate intention of forcing him into heart failure. When Villiers collapsed, the criminal, if I may call him so, was ready. He snatched the paper which, I might add, probably *was* kept under his pillow and scanned it. Then he destroyed the paper itself in the flash-disposal, but he was in a hurry and destruction wasn't complete."

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Ryger interrupted. "How do you know all this? Were you a witness?"

"Almost," said Mandel. "Villiers was not quite dead at the moment of his first collapse. When the criminal left, he managed to reach the phone and call my room. He choked out a few phrases, enough to outline what had occurred. Unfortunately, I was not in my room; a late conference kept me away. However, my recording attachment taped it. I always play the recording tape back whenever I return to my room or office. Bureaucratic habit. I called back. He was dead."

"Well, then," said Ryger, "who did he say did it?"

"He didn't. Or if he did, it was unintelligible. But one word rang out clearly. It was *classmate*."

Talliaferro detached his scanner from its place in his inner jacket pocket and held it out toward Mandel. Quietly, he said, "If you would like to develop the film in my scanner, you are welcome to do so. You will not find Villiers' paper there."

At once, Kaunas did the same, and Ryger, with a scowl, joined.

Mandel took all three scanners and said dryly, "Presumably, whichever one of you has done this has already disposed of the piece of exposed film with the paper on it. However —"

Talliaferro raised his eyebrows. "You may search my person or my room."

But Ryger was still scowling, "Now wait a minute, wait one bloody minute. Are you the police?"

Mandel stared at him. "Do you *want* the police? Do you want a scandal and a murder charge? Do you want the Convention disrupted and the System press to make a holiday out of astronomy and astronomers? Villiers' death might well have been accidental. He *did* have a bad heart. Whichever one of you was there may well have acted on impulse. It may not have been a premeditated crime. If whoever it is will return the negative, we can avoid a great deal of trouble."

"Even for the criminal?" asked Talliaferro.

Mandel shrugged. "There may be trouble for him. I will not promise immunity. But whatever the trouble, it won't be public disgrace and life imprisonment, as it might be if the police are called in."

Silence.

Mandel said, "It is one of you three."

Silence.

Mandel went on, "I think I can see the original reasoning of the guilty person. The paper would be destroyed. Only we four knew of the mass-transference and only I had ever seen a demonstration. Moreover you had only his word, a madman's word perhaps, that I had seen it. With Villiers dead of heart-failure and the paper gone, it would be easy to believe Dr. Ryger's theory that there was no mass-transference and never had been. A

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year or two might pass and our criminal, in possession of the mass-transference data, could reveal it little by little, rig experiments, publish careful papers and end as the apparent discoverer with all that would imply in terms of money and renown. Even his own classmates would suspect nothing. At most they would believe that the long-past affair with Villiers had inspired him to begin investigations in the field. No more."

Mandel looked sharply from one face to another. "But none of that will work now. Any of the three of you who comes through with mass-transference is proclaiming himself the criminal. I've seen the demonstration; I know it is legitimate; I know that one of you possesses a record of the paper. The information is therefore useless to you. Give it up then."

Silence.

Mandel walked to the door and turned again. "I'd appreciate it if you would stay here till I return. I won't be long. I hope the guilty one will use the interval to consider. If he's afraid a confession will lose him his job, let him remember that a session with the police may lose him his liberty *and* cost him the Psychic Probe." He hefted the three scanners, looked grim and somewhat in need of sleep. "I'll develop these."

Kaunas tried to smile. "What if we make a break for it while you're gone?"

"Only one of you has reason to try," said Mandel. "I think I can rely on the two innocent ones to control the third, if only out of self-protection."

He left.

It was 5 in the morning. Ryger looked at his watch indignantly. "A hell of a thing. I want to sleep."

"We can curl up here," said Talliaferro, philosophically. "Is anyone planning a confession?"

Kaunas looked away and Ryger's lip lifted.

"I didn't think so." Talliaferro closed his eyes, leaned his large head back against the chair and said in a tired voice. "Back on the Moon, they're in the slack season. We've got a two-week night and then it's busy, busy. Then there's two weeks of sun and there's nothing but calculations, correlations, and bull-sessions. That's the hard time. I hate it. If there were more women; if I could arrange something permanent . . ."

In a whisper, Kaunas talked about the fact that it was still impossible to get the entire Sun above the horizon and in view of the telescope on Mercury. But, with another two miles of track soon to be laid down for the Observatory — move the whole thing, you know, tremendous forces involved, solar energy used directly — it might be managed. It *would* be managed.

Even Ryger consented to talk of Ceres after listening to the low murmur of the other voices. There

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was the problem there of the two-hour rotation period, which meant the stars whipped across the sky at an angular velocity twelve times that in Earth's sky. A net of three light 'scopes, three radioscopes, three of everything, caught the fields of study from one another as they whirled past.

"Could you use one of the poles?" asked Kaunas.

"You're thinking of Mercury and the Sun," said Ryger, impatiently. "Even at the poles, the sky would still twist, and half of it would be forever hidden. Now if Ceres showed only one face to the Sun, the way Mercury does, we could have a permanent night sky with the stars rotating slowly once in three years."

The sky lightened and it dawned slowly.

Talliaferro was half asleep, but he kept hold of half-consciousness firmly. He would not fall asleep and leave the others awake. Each of the three, he thought, was wondering, "Who? Who?" . . .

Except the guilty one, of course.

Talliaferro's eyes snapped open as Mandel entered again. The sky, as seen from the window, had grown blue. Talliaferro was glad the window was closed. The hotel was air-conditioned, of course, but windows would be opened during the mild seasons of the year by those Earthmen who fancied the illusion of fresh air. Talliaferro, with Moon-vacuum on his mind, shuddered at the thought with real discomfort.

Mandel said, "Have any of you anything to say?"

They looked at him steadily. Ryger shook his head.

Mandel said, "I have developed the film in your scanners, gentlemen, and viewed the results." He tossed scanners and developed slivers of film on to the bed. "Nothing! — You'll have trouble sorting out the film, I'm afraid. For that I'm sorry. And now there is still the question of the missing film."

"If any," said Ryger, and yawned prodigiously.

Mandel said, "I would suggest we come down to Villiers' room, gentlemen."

Kaunas looked startled. "Why?"

Talliaferro said, "Is this psychology? Bring the criminal to the scene of the crime and remorse will wring a confession from him?"

Mandel said, "A less melodramatic reason is that I would like to have the two of you who are innocent help me find the missing film of Villiers' paper."

"Do you think it's there?" asked Ryger, challengingly.

"Possibly. It's a beginning. We can then search each of your rooms. The symposium on Astronautics doesn't start till tomorrow at 10 A.M. We have till then."

"And after that?"

"It may have to be the police."

They stepped gingerly into Villiers' room. Ryger was red, Kaunas

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pale. Talliaferro tried to remain calm.

Last night, they had seen it under artificial lighting with a scowling, dishevelled Villiers clutching his pillow, staring them down, ordering them away. Now there was the scentless odor of death about it.

Mandel fiddled with the window-polarizer to let more light in, and adjusted it too far, so that the eastern Sun slipped in.

Kaunas threw his arm up to shade his eyes and screamed, "The Sun!" so that all the others froze.

Kaunas' face had gone into a kind of terror, as though it were his Mercurian Sun that he had caught a blinding glimpse of.

Talliaferro thought of his own reaction to the possibility of open air and his teeth gritted. They were all bent crooked by their ten years away from Earth.

Kaunas ran to the window, fumbling for the polarizer, and then the breath came out of him in a huge gasp.

Mandel stepped to his side. "What's wrong?" and the other two joined them.

The city lay stretched below them and outward to the horizon in broken stone and brick, bathed in the rising sun, with the shadowed portions toward them. Talliaferro cast it all a furtive and uneasy glance.

Kaunas, his chest seemingly contracted past the point where he could cry out, stared at something much closer. There, on the outer window sill, one corner secured in a trifling imperfection, a crack in the cement, was an inch-long strip of milky-gray film, and on it were the early rays of the rising sun.

Mandel, with an angry, incoherent cry, threw up the window and snatched it away. He shielded it in one cupped hand, staring out of hot and reddened eyes.

He said, "Wait here!"

There was nothing to say. When Mandel left, they sat down and stared stupidly at one another.

Mandel was back in twenty minutes. He said quietly (in a voice that gave the impression, somehow, that it was quiet only because its owner had passed far beyond the raving stage) "The corner in the crack wasn't overexposed. I could make out a few words. It is Villiers' paper. The rest is ruined; nothing can be salvaged. It's gone."

"What next?" said Talliaferro.

Mandel shrugged wearily. "Right now, I don't care. Mass-transference is gone until someone as brilliant as Villiers works it out again. I shall work on it but I have no illusions as to my own capacity. With it gone, I suppose you three don't matter, guilty or not. What's the difference?" His whole body seemed to have loosened and sunk into despair.

But Talliaferro's voice grew hard. "Now, hold on. In your eyes, any of the three of us might be guilty. I,

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for instance. You are a big man in the field and you will never have a good word to say for me. The general idea may arise that I am incompetent or worse. I will not be ruined by the shadow of guilt. Now let's solve this thing."

"I am no detective," said Mandel, wearily.

"Then why don't you call in the police, damn it."

Ryger said, "Wait a while, Tal. Are you implying that I'm guilty?"

"I'm only saying that I'm innocent."

Kaunas raised his voice in fright. "It will mean the Psychic Probe for each of us. There may be mental damage —"

Mandel raised both arms high in the air. "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Please! There is one thing we might do short of the police; and you are right, Dr. Talliaferro, it would be unfair to the innocent to leave this matter here."

They turned to him in various stages of hostility. Ryger said, "What do you suggest?"

"I have a friend named Wendell Urth. You may have heard of him, or you may not, but perhaps I can arrange to see him tonight."

"What if we can?" demanded Talliaferro. "Where does that get us?"

"He's an odd man," said Mandel hesitantly. "Very odd. And very brilliant in his way. He has helped the police before this and he may be able to help us now."

PART 2

Edward Talliaferro could not forbear staring at the room and its occupant with the greatest astonishment. It and he seemed to exist in isolation, and to be part of no recognizable world. The sounds of Earth were absent in this well-padded, windowless nest. The light and air of Earth had been blanked out in artificial illumination and conditioning.

It was a large room, dim and cluttered. They had picked their way across a littered floor to a couch from which book-films had been brusquely cleared and dumped to one side in an amorphous tangle.

The man who owned the room had a large round face on a stumpy round body. He moved quickly about on his short legs, jerking his head as he spoke until his thick glasses all but bounced off the thoroughly inconspicuous nubble that served in the office of a nose. His thick-lidded, somewhat protuberant eyes gleamed in myopic good nature at them all, as he seated himself in his own chair-desk combination, lit directly by the one bright light in the room.

"So good of you to come, gentlemen. Pray excuse the condition of my room." He waved stubby fingers in a wide-sweeping gesture. "I am engaged in cataloguing the many objects of extraterrological interest I have accumulated. It is a tremendous job. For instance —"

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He dodged out of his seat and burrowed in a heap of objects beside the desk till he came up with a smoky gray object, semitranslucent and roughly cylindrical. "This," he said, "is a Callistan object that may be a relic of intelligent non-human entities. It is not decided. No more than a dozen have been discovered and this is the most perfect single specimen I know of."

He tossed it to one side and Talliaferro jumped. The plump man stared in his direction and said, "It's not breakable." He sat down again, clasped his pudgy fingers tightly over his abdomen and let them pump slowly in and out as he breathed. "And now what can I do for you?"

Hubert Mandel had carried through the introductions and Talliaferro was considering deeply. Surely it was a man named Wendell Urth who had written a recent book entitled *Comparative Evolutionary Processes on Water-Oxygen Planets* . . . and surely this could not be the man.

He said, "Are you the author of *Comparative Evolutionary Processes*, Dr. Urth?"

A beatific smile spread across Urth's face. "You've read it?"

"Well, no, I haven't, but —"

Urth's expression grew instantly censorious. "Then you should. Right now. Here, I have a copy —"

He bounced out of his chair again and Mandel cried, "Now wait, Urth, first things first. This is serious."

He virtually forced Urth back into his chair and began speaking rapidly as though to prevent any further side issues from erupting. He told the whole story with admirable word-economy.

Urth reddened slowly as he listened. He seized his glasses and shoved them higher up on his nose. "Mass-transference!" he cried.

"I saw it with my own eyes," said Mandel.

"And you never told me."

"I was sworn to secrecy. The man was . . . peculiar. I explained that."

Urth pounded the desk. "How could you allow such a discovery to remain the property of an eccentric, Mandel? The knowledge should have been forced from him by Psychic Probe, if necessary."

"It would have killed him," protested Mandel.

But Urth was rocking back and forth with his hands clasped tightly to his cheeks. "Mass-transference. The only way a decent, civilized man could travel. The only possible way. The only conceivable way. If I had known. If I could have been there. But the hotel is nearly thirty miles away."

Ryger, who listened with an expression of annoyance on his face, interposed, "I understand there's a flitter line direct to Convention Hall. It could have got you there in ten minutes."

Urth stiffened and looked at Ryger strangely. His cheeks bulged.

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He jumped to his feet and scurried out of the room.

Ryger said, "What the devil?"

Mandel muttered, "Damn it. I should have warned you."

"About what?"

"Dr. Urth doesn't travel on any sort of conveyance. It's a phobia. He moves about only on foot."

Kaunas blinked about in the dimness. "But he's an extraterrologist, isn't he? An expert on life-forms of other planets?"

Talliaferro had risen and now stood before a Galactic Lens on a pedestal. He stared at the inner gleam of the star systems. He had never seen a Lens so large or so elaborate.

Mandel said, "He's an extraterrologist, yes, but he's never visited any of the planets on which he is expert and he never will. In thirty years, I doubt if he's ever been more than a mile from this room."

Ryger laughed.

Mandel flushed angrily, "You may find it funny, but I'd appreciate your being careful what you say, when Dr. Urth comes back."

Urth sidled in a moment later. "My apologies, gentlemen," he said in a whisper. "And now let us approach our problem. Perhaps one of you wishes to confess?"

Talliaferro's lips quirked sourly. This plump, self-imprisoned extraterrologist was scarcely formidable enough to force a confession from anyone. Fortunately, there would be no need of him.

Talliaferro said, "Dr. Urth, are you connected with the police?"

A certain smugness seemed to suffuse Urth's ruddy face. "I have no official connection, Dr. Talliaferro, but my unofficial relationships are very good indeed."

"In that case, I will give you some information which you can carry to the police."

Urth drew in his abdomen and hitched at his shirt tail. It came free and slowly he polished his glasses with it. When he was quite through and had perched them precariously on his nose once more, he said, "And what is that?"

"I will tell you who was present when Villiers died and who scanned his paper."

"You have solved the mystery?"

"I've thought about it all day. I think I've solved it." Talliaferro rather enjoyed the sensation he was creating.

"Well then?"

Talliaferro took a deep breath. This was not going to be easy to do, though he had been planning it for hours. "The guilty man," he said, "is obviously Dr. Hubert Mandel."

Mandel stared at Talliaferro in sudden, hard-breathing indignation. "Look here, doctor," he began loudly, "if you have any basis —"

Urth's tenor voice soared above the interruption. "Let him talk, Hubert, let us hear him. You suspected him and there is no law that forbids him to suspect you."

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Mandel fell angrily silent.

Talliaferro, not allowing his voice to falter, said, "It is more than just suspicion, Dr. Urth. The evidence is perfectly plain. Four of us knew about mass-transference, but only one of us, Dr. Mandel, had actually seen a demonstration. He *knew* it to be a fact. He *knew* a paper on the subject existed. We three knew only that Villiers was more or less unbalanced. Oh, we might have thought there was just a chance. We visited him at eleven, I think, just to check on that, though none of us actually said so — but he only acted crazier than ever.

"Check special knowledge and motive then on Dr. Mandel's side. Now, Dr. Urth, picture something else. Whoever it was who confronted Villiers at midnight, saw him collapse and scanned his paper (let's keep him anonymous for a moment), must have been terribly startled to see Villiers apparently come to life again and to hear him talking into the telephone. Our criminal, in the panic of the moment, realized one thing: he must get rid of the one piece of incriminating material evidence.

"He had to get rid of the undeveloped film of the paper and he had to do it in such a way that it would be safe from discovery so that he might pick it up once more if he remained unsuspected. The outer window sill was ideal. Quickly, he threw up Villiers' window, placed the strip of film outside and left. Now, even if Villiers survived or if his telephoning brought results, it would be merely Villiers' word against his own and it would be easy to show that Villiers was unbalanced."

Talliaferro paused in something like triumph. This would be irrefutable.

Wendell Urth blinked at him and wiggled the thumbs of his clasped hands so that they slapped against his ample shirt front. He said, "And the significance of all that?"

"The significance is that the window was thrown open and the film placed in open air. Now Ryger has lived for ten years on Ceres, Kaunas on Mercury, I on the Moon — barring short leaves and not many of them. We commented to one another several times yesterday on the difficulty of growing acclimated to Earth.

"Our work-worlds are each airless objects. We never go out in the open without a suit. To expose ourselves to unenclosed space is unthinkable. None of us could have opened the window without a severe inner struggle. Dr. Mandel, however, has lived on Earth exclusively. Opening a window to him is only a matter of a bit of muscular exertion. He could do it. We couldn't. Ergo, he did it."

Talliaferro sat back and smiled a bit.

"Space, that's it!" cried Ryger, with enthusiasm.

"That's not it at all," roared

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Mandel, half-rising as though tempted to throw himself at Talliaferro. "I deny the whole miserable fabrication. What about the record I have of Villiers' phone call? He used the word *classmate*. The entire tape makes it obvious —"

"He was a dying man," said Talliaferro. "Much of what he said you admitted was incomprehensible. I ask you, Dr. Mandel, without having heard the tape, if it isn't true that Villiers' voice is distorted past recognition?"

"Well —" said Mandel, confused.

"I'm sure it is. There is no reason to suppose, then, that you might not have rigged up the tape in advance, complete with the damning word *classmate*."

Mandel said, "Good Lord, how would I know there were classmates at the Convention? How would I know they knew about the mass-transference?"

"Villiers might have told you. I presume he did."

"Now, look," said Mandel. "You three saw Villiers alive at eleven. The medical examiner, seeing Villiers' body shortly after 3 A.M., declared he had been dead at least two hours. That was certain. The time of death therefore, was between 11 P.M. and 1 A.M. I was at a late conference last night. I can prove my whereabouts, miles from the hotel, between 10 and 2, by a dozen witnesses no one of whom anyone can possibly question. Is that enough for you?"

Talliaferro paused a moment. Then he went on, stubbornly, "Even so. Suppose you got back to the hotel by 2:30. You went to Villiers' room to discuss his talk. You found the door open, or you had a duplicate key. Anyway, you found him dead. You seized the opportunity to scan the paper —"

"And if he were already dead, and couldn't make phone calls, why should I hide the film?"

"To remove suspicion. You may have a second copy of the film safe in your possession. For that matter, we have only your own word that the paper itself was destroyed."

"Enough. Enough!" cried Urth. "It is an interesting hypothesis, Dr. Talliaferro, but it falls to the ground of its own weight."

Talliaferro frowned. "That's your opinion, perhaps —"

"It would be anyone's opinion. Anyone, that is, with the power of human thought. Don't you see that Hubert Mandel did too much to be the criminal?"

"No," said Talliaferro.

Wendell Urth smiled benignly. "As a scientist, Dr. Talliaferro, you undoubtedly know better than to fall in love with your own theories to the exclusion of facts or reasoning. Do me the pleasure of behaving similarly as a detective.

"Consider that if Dr. Mandel had brought about the death of Villiers and faked an alibi, or if he had found Villiers dead and taken advantage of that, how little he would really

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have had to do! Why scan the paper or even pretend that anyone had done so. He could simply have taken the paper. Who else knew of its existence? Nobody, really. There was no reason to think Villiers told anyone else about it. Villiers was pathologically secretive. There would have been every reason to think that he told no one.

"No one knew Villiers was giving a talk, except Dr. Mandel. It wasn't announced. No abstract was published. Dr. Mandel could have walked off with the paper in perfect confidence.

"Even if he had discovered that Villiers had talked to his classmates about the matter, what of it? What evidence would his classmates have except the word of one whom they are themselves willing to consider a madman?

"By announcing instead that Villiers' paper had been destroyed, by declaring his death to be not entirely natural, by searching for a scanned copy of the film — in short by everything Dr. Mandel has done, he has aroused a suspicion that only he could possibly have aroused when he need only have remained quiet to have committed a perfect crime. If he were the criminal, he would be more stupid, more colossally obtuse than anyone I have ever known. And Dr. Mandel, after all, is none of that."

Talliaferro thought hard but found nothing to say.

Ryger said, "Then who did it?"

"One of you three. That's obvious."

"But which?"

"Oh, that's obvious, too. I knew which of you was guilty the moment Dr. Mandel had completed his description of events."

Talliaferro stared at the plump extraterrologist with distaste. The bluff did not frighten him, but it was affecting the other two. Ryger's lips were thrust out and Kaunas' lower jaw had relaxed moronically. They looked like fish, both of them.

He said, "Which one, then? Tell us."

Urth blinked. "First, I want to make it perfectly plain that the important thing is mass-transference. It can still be recovered."

Mandel, scowling still, said querulously, "What the devil are you talking about, Urth?"

"The man who scanned the paper probably looked at what he was scanning. I doubt that he had the time or the presence of mind to read it, and if he did, I doubt if he could remember it . . . consciously. However, there is the Psychic Probe. If he so much as glanced at the paper, what impinged on his retina could be Probed."

There was an uneasy stir.

Urth said at once, "No need to be afraid of the Probe. Proper handling is safe, particularly if a man offers himself voluntarily. When damage is done, it is usually because of un-

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necessary resistance, a kind of mental tearing, you know. So if the guilty man will voluntarily confess, place himself in my hands —"

Talliaferro laughed. The sudden noise rang out sharply in the dim quiet of the room. The psychology was so transparent and artless.

Wendell Urth looked almost bewildered at the reaction and stared earnestly at Talliaferro over his glasses. He said, "I have enough influence with the police to keep the Probing entirely confidential."

Ryger said, savagely, "I didn't do it."

Kaunas shook his head.

Talliaferro disdained any answer.

Urth sighed. "Then I shall have to point out the guilty man. It will be traumatic. It will make things harder." He tightened the grip on his belly and his fingers twitched. "Dr. Talliaferro indicated that the film was hidden on the outer window sill so that it might remain safe from discovery and from harm. I agree with him."

"Thank you," said Talliaferro, dryly.

"However, why should anyone think that an outer window sill is a particularly safe hiding place? The police would certainly look there.

"Even in the absence of the police it was discovered. Who would tend to consider anything outside a building as particularly safe? Obviously, some person who has lived a long time on an airless world and has had it drilled into him that no one goes outside an enclosed place without detailed precautions.

"To someone on the Moon for instance, anything hidden outside a Lunar Dome would be comparatively safe. Men venture out only rarely and then only on specific business. So he would overcome the hardship of opening a window and exposing himself to what he would subconsciously consider a vacuum for the sake of a safe hiding place. The reflex thought, *Outside an inhabited structure is safe*, would do the trick."

Talliaferro said between clenched teeth, "Why do you mention the Moon, Dr. Urth?"

Urth said, blandly, "Only as an example. What I've said so far applies to all three of you. But now comes the crucial point, the matter of the dying night."

Talliaferro frowned. "You mean the night Villiers died?"

"I mean any night. See here, even granted that an outer window sill was a safe hiding place, which of you would be mad enough to consider it a safe hiding place *for a piece of unexposed film?* Scanner film isn't very sensitive, to be sure, and is made to be developed under all sorts of hit-and-miss conditions. Diffuse nighttime illumination wouldn't seriously affect it, but diffuse daylight would ruin it in a few minutes, and direct sunlight would ruin it at once. Everyone knows that."

Mandel said, "Go ahead, Urth. What is this leading to?"

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"You're trying to rush me," said Urth, with a massive pout. "I want you to see this clearly. The criminal wanted, above all, to keep the film safe. It was his only record of something of supreme value to himself and to the world. Why would he put it where it would inevitably be ruined almost immediately by the morning Sun? — Only because he did not expect the morning Sun ever to come. He thought the night, so to speak, was immortal.

"But nights *aren't* immortal. On Earth, they die and give way to daytime. Even the six-month polar night is a dying night eventually. The nights on Ceres last only two hours; the nights on the Moon last two weeks. They are dying nights, too, and Drs. Talliaferro and Ryger know that day must always come."

Kaunas rose. "But wait —"

Wendell Urth faced him full. "No longer any need to wait, Dr. Kaunas. Mercury is the only sizable object in the Solar System that turns only one face to the Sun. Even taking libration into account, fully three-eighths of its surface is true dark-side and never sees the Sun. The Polar Observatory is at the rim of that dark-side. For ten years, you have grown used to the fact that nights are immortal, that a surface in darkness remains eternally in darkness, and so you entrusted unexposed film to Earth's night, forgetting in your excitement that nights must die —"

Kaunas came forward. "Wait —"

Urth was inexorable. "I am told that when Mandel adjusted the polarizer in Villiers' room, you screamed at the sunlight. Was that your ingrained fear of the Mercurian Sun, or your sudden realization of what sunlight meant to your plans? You rushed forward. Was that to adjust the polarizer or to stare at the ruined film?"

Kaunas fell to his knees. "I didn't mean it. I wanted to speak to him, only to speak to him, and he screamed and collapsed. I thought he was dead and the paper was under his pillow and it all just followed. One thing led on to another and before I knew it, I couldn't get out of it anymore. But I meant none of it. I swear it."

They had formed a semicircle about him and Wendell Urth stared at the moaning Kaunas with pity in his eyes.

An ambulance had come and gone. Talliaferro finally brought himself to say stiffly to Mandel, "I hope, sir, there will be no hard feelings for anything said here."

And Mandel had answered as stiffly, "I think we had all better forget as much as possible of what has happened during the last twenty-four hours."

They were standing in the doorway, ready to leave, and Wendell Urth ducked his smiling head and said, "There's the question of my fee, you know."

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Mandel looked at him with a startled expression.

"Not money," said Urth, at once. "But when the first mass-transference set-up for humans is established, I want a trip arranged for me right away."

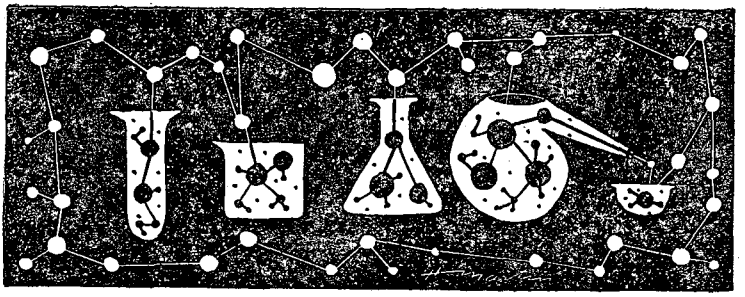
Mandel continued to look anxious. "Now, wait. Trips through outer space are a long way off."

Urth shook his head rapidly. "Not outer space. Not at all. I would like to step across to Lower Falls, New Hampshire."

"All right. But why?"

Urth looked up. To Talliaferro's outright surprise, the extraterrologist's face wore an expression compounded equally of shyness and eagerness.

Urth said, "I once — quite a long time ago — knew a girl there. It's been many years — but I sometimes wonder . . ."



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Garson Kanin's credits take up, in condensed form, 40 of the tight-packed lines of WHO'S WHO IN AMERICA. *We can only briefly mention here that he's an ex-actor, married to writer-actress Ruth Gordon, who has become one of the outstanding stage and screen directors, responsible for such unforgotten and wholly diverse films as* BACHELOR MOTHER *and* THE TRUE GLORY. *As a writer, he is co-author (with his wife) of the Academy-nominated* A DOUBLE LIFE *and (with Howard Dietz) of the incomparable Metropolitan Opera adaptation of* FLEDERMAUS, *and solo creator of as funny and shrewd a comedy as the American stage has seen in the past decade,* BORN YESTERDAY. *Turn such a versatile talent loose on fantasy, and the result is bound to be something unique: in this case a small masterpiece of ironic logic, recorded by a relentlessly accurate ear, which may well be the damnedest thing you'll read this year.*

The Damnedest Thing

by GARSON KANIN

THE UNDERTAKER CAME HOME early. He kissed his wife, then went upstairs to wash up for supper. When he came down, *she* kissed *him*.

"Be five, six minutes," she said. "Legga lamb."

"Okay. I'll get me a drink," said the undertaker.

"And boiled leeks," she added, before returning to the kitchen.

The undertaker went into the sitting room and sat. Beside his chair, on a large end table, lay a copy of the evening paper. Beside it stood a nearly full bottle of whisky and a tumbler. He put the paper on his lap and smiled at the bottle as he would at a friend.

"Boy, oh, boy," he mumbled. He reached out and grasped the bottle firmly by its neck, keeping his thumb on the cork. He turned the bottle upside down once, then uncorked it. Next, he slowly decanted about two inches of liquor into the tumbler, corked the bottle, set it down, picked up the tumbler and drained it. He then put his nose into the empty glass and took one deep breath. Finally, he put the glass beside the bottle and picked up his paper. His face was without

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expression as he scanned the top half of the front page, but when he flipped the paper over to look at the bottom half, a small headline took his attention, and he said to it, quietly, "You don' say so!"

He returned the paper to his lap, reached out and grasped the bottle firmly by its neck, keeping his thumb on the cork. He turned the bottle upside down once, then uncorked it. Next, he slowly decanted about four inches of liquor into the tumbler, corked the bottle, set it down, picked up the tumbler and drained it. He then put his nose into the empty glass and took one deep breath. Finally, he put the glass beside the bottle and picked up his paper. As he did so, his wife appeared in the archway which led to the dining room.

"Let's go," she said. "Everything's on."

"Right there," he replied, and made his way to his place at the table. His wife was already seated at hers, piling food onto her plate. He reached to the platter of lamb and served himself, meagerly.

His wife bristled. "What's the matter? Against lamb?"

"No."

"Then so what?"

"I think I just killed off my whole appetite."

"Why?"

"I didn't mean it, only I did. With an extry slug of whisky."

"What'd you want t'do *that* for?"

"I didn't *want*, I just *did*. A double slug, if you want the truth."

"You'da told me in time, I coulda saved myself in the kitchen, Arthur. Far as I'm personally concerned, delicatessen suits me soon as lamb."

"I didn't know I was going to."

"How about tomorrow *you* cook a legga lamb and *I'll* get crocked an' not eat? Why not?"

"Don' make a situation, Rhoda. I said I'm sorry."

"When? I didn' hear no sorry."

"All right, I'm saying it now. Sorry."

"You're welcome."

They ate in silence, until Arthur ended it. "Good piece of meat. Gristede's?"

"A lot you know. Drunk."

He put down his fork. "Rhoda, I want to assure you this much. That I'm not drunk. Far from it. In fact, I wish we had the habit of a glass of wine with meals. Red, white, I don' know which it is you're supposed to with lamb. But in the store, they prob'ly give a free booklet. It's a nice habit to have. Very civilized. In many countries, they wouldn't think of without it. And got nothing to do with drunk in any way, shape, manner or form." He picked up his fork and resumed the meal.

"If I knew what's got into you all of a sudden," said Rhoda, "I would be happy. I'm always telling how at least you, whatever faults you got, don't make a pig of yourself when it comes to alcoholic beverage. You've always been

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strictly moderation. Practice and preach."

"I'm *still*."

"So what's all this extry slugs and you want suddenly wine in addition?"

"The wine I just happened to mention. A civilized habit."

"An' the extry slugs?"

"*Slug*, not *slugs*."

"So *slug?*"

"That's something else again."

"*What* else again?"

"Rhoda, if you knew the thing happened to me today, you absolutely wouldn' begrudge me."

"I don't begrudge, Arthur. I like you to have anything in the world if you want it. Only I worry if I see you turning into like Gunderson over there with nothing in his stomach only rye whisky and prunes for a year an' two months, Mrs. Gunderson tells me." She munched her food, sadly.

"Rhoda, I advise you put your mind at rest. With all my faults, as you mentioned — an' one of these days, by the way, if I get the time I appreciate you telling me just what you call faults; not now, though — one of them is not I'm alcoholic or even nearly. The wine talk was one thing, just a topic of conversation, figure of speech, y'might say. The other thing, the extry slug — not *slugs*, *slug* — this is something else again. This I admit to, in fact, brought up myself. An' the reason was what happened to me today down to the place. When I tell you, if I tell you, you will definitely not begrudge me. In fact, take a slug yourself, I wouldn' be surprised. Only I don' know should I tell you."

"Tell, don' tell," chanted Rhoda.

"It was the damnedest thing ever happened to me in my entire life. In fact, *God* damnedest," said the undertaker.

"Eat your meat."

"Rhoda, listen. Because this is it." He took a breath and swallowed before continuing. "I had an argument with a corpse today."

"Eat a few vegetables, at least, if not meat."

"Did you hear what I just told?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's more. Not only I had this argument with this corpse, but I *lost* the argument, what's more."

"The feature goes on 7:10," replied Rhoda. "But if you wanna catch the newsreel an' cartoon, then ten *to*."

"I just as soon."

"All right, then, don't dawdle. Salad?"

"Yes. Look, I can't seem to put my point over. Oh! You think I'm affected by the — but no, Rhoda. I take an oath, I raise my hand. I know what I'm talking of and this is the God's truth what I'm on the verge to tell you."

"All right, Arthur. But eat meanwhile."

"Now the stiff I had the run-in with, the corpse, is Stanton C. Baravale. Was."

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"The department store."

"That's him. Last night he died, in the private wing of Summit General. 10:53 P.M."

"I read it, yes."

"This morning they brought him in early; in fact, they were waiting out front when I got there."

"Because you got a late start, I told you. You wanna watch that."

"You're one hundred per cent wrong, Rhoda, but I got no time to argue because I don' want to lose my thread. So they brought him in and we laid him out careful in the big room, and just about we were getting ready to go to work, Thor says to me, 'Mr. Roos, could I be excused?' "

"I like to see you excuse him for good," said Rhoda. "That dope."

"No, he's a good boy. But he says further, 'I slammed out with no breakfast an' I like to go to the Whelan's get a bite to eat.' 'Go ahead,' I says, 'only I hope no trouble home.' So Thor tells me how again his mother starts on him regarding learning the embalming game. How it makes her nervous he's an embalmer's apprentice. Some people!"

"How'd she like it there was *nobody* doin' the type work?"

"The very point I made to Thor, darling."

"An' what'd *he* say?"

"That it was the very point he made to *her*."

"I should think so, f'God's sake!"

"Anyway, he goes to the Whelan's, an' I start in gettin' the stuff prepared. An' I was whistling, I remember well, because I was whistling 'There Is Nothing Like a Dame' an' I was havin' trouble to recall the middle part which slipped my mind."

"Ta da da *da* da da *da!*" sang Rhoda, helpfully.

"Yes, I know. It came to me later. But while I was whistling, I heard this noise. Like the clearing of a throat. Well, I turned."

"An' what was it?" asked Rhoda, interested for the first time.

"It was the clearing of a throat."

"What're you saying, Arthur?"

"I'm saying that Stanton C. Baravale was sitting up, looking terrible sick."

"Why shouldn't he if he was dead?"

"Wait a second, Rhoda. Let me get on with it. The man sat there an' he looks at me, then he looks around, then to me, then he says — but soft, he was so soft I could hardly hear 'im. Like this. He says, 'Who're you?' "

Rhoda stacked their plates, pushed them aside, pulled the pie tin toward her and began cutting it, carefully.

"Arthur, are you telling the truth?"

"As God is my judge."

"Then go ahead," said Rhoda. "Only speak up while I get the coffee off."

"In twenty-eight years," shouted Arthur, "it's happened to me twice

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only. The other time, you remember, the Winkleman boy how he came to in the shop an' it was in all the papers, an' he's still around, I believe. Since nineteen twenty-eight."

Rhoda returned with the coffeepot, sat down and poured two cups.

"He's still around," she said, "and a very mean job he turned out. All the time in trouble."

"So when Stanton C. Baravale said, 'Who're you?' like that, I told him. Naturally. An' where he was an' he asks me how come. So I said, 'Well, the fact is, Mr. Baravale, you died last night. 10:53 P.M.' 'I knew it must be *something* like that,' he says. 'I feel light as a feather. An' cold, too,' he says. 'I must have a temperature of below zero.' So I says, 'You just relax, sir, an' I'll get Summit General on the phone in one second.' 'Don't do that,' he says. 'It'll just cause talk, an' I'm goin' out again in a minute.' "

"Think of that," said Rhoda, sipping her boiling coffee.

"Darling," continued the undertaker, "I want to tell you, I just stood there. I was in a state of shock. Next thing, he was talkin' again. 'What was it?' he says, still whisperin', y'know. 'There was something worryin' me I didn't settle, that's why I came back. I know,' he says, a little louder. '*You!*' "

"You?" echoed Rhoda.

"That's it. He says to me how like a fool he never specified any burial details, an' just left it general. That it was the last thing he was thinkin' about before he went off, an' some kind of leftover power in his brain must've brought him back for long enough."

"Arthur, I don't begrudge you that extry slug. Not for one moment."

" 'Now then,' he says to me, 'what's it going to cost?' 'I really couldn't say,' I says. 'You better,' he says. 'The way that fool Immerman drew the damn thing it reads "after all funeral expenses have been paid," and so forth. Well, hell,' he says, 'that can mean *any*thing. Moment like this, my kids feel bad, they're bound to spend more'n is necessary and what's the sense to that? Now what's the cheapest?' he says. 'All depends,' I answer him, 'how many persons, cars, music or no, casket.' At this he leans on his elbow an' he says, 'Six people, one car, no music, cheapest box you carry.' So I says, 'But what if the instructions I get —' He never let me finish. 'God damn it,' he says. 'Give me some paper an' pen'n ink.' I give it him, he writes a page, then he says, 'You have any trouble, show that!" Well, Rhoda, by this time I was comin' to *myself* a little more. An' I says, 'Please let me use the phone.' 'No,' he says, 'just give me your gentleman's word you'll handle it my way.' 'But, look,' I says, 'this paper's no good. You're legally dead as of 10:53 P.M. last night.' 'That's why

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I put last week's date on,' he says. 'An' it's in my handwriting, no mistake about that.' Then he says to me, 'What's the time *now*?' 'Eight thirteen A.M.,' I says. 'Well, let's make it 8:15, officially,' he says, and lays down again and says the date. 'January five, nineteen fifty-six,' he says. 'Thank you, Mr. Roos,' he says. 'Been nice talkin' to you.' An' then, Rhoda, he just by God went out!"

"Well, I never," said Rhoda. "Gimme a hand here, will you, Arthur, please?"

Together, they cleared the table, replaced the lace centerpiece and the wax-fruit bowl. In the kitchen, he washed, she dried. They worked for a time with swift efficiency, without speaking. Finally, Rhoda asked, "What're you goin' t'do?"

"Y'got me there, dear."

"You mentioned to anyone? Thor?"

"Not yet, no."

"They ordered up anything yet?"

"Doggone right. Man brought a letter from the lawyer's place. Big chapel, minimum three hundred guests. Organ *and* string trio. Thirty cars. Canopy and chairs. Memorial reception after, main hall. Organ *and* string trio. Refreshments. Rhoda, one of the biggest things we've ever handled. I mean it's between seven, eight hundred clear profit no matter how you look."

"You got the page he wrote there?"

"Right here," said Arthur.

"Lemme have a look it."

"Wait'll I wipe my hands here." Having dried his hands, he took the paper from his breast pocket and handed it to his wife.

She read it, carefully. "Well," she said. "Only one thing to do."

"That's right," said Arthur. "You want to or me?"

"I'll," said Rhoda, stepping to the gas range.

"Careful, dear," cautioned Arthur. "Don't burn yourself."

"No, darling," said his wife. She turned on the gas jet nearest her. The automatic monitor ignited the burner and Rhoda held a corner of the paper over it. She turned the jet off as the paper began to burn, neatly. Holding it before her she crossed the kitchen to the sink and joined her husband. Now she carefully placed the flaming handful into the sink. They both stood there, watching the paper turn to ash. Arthur put his arm around his wife, tenderly.

"It's not like he couldn't spare it," he said.

"An' anyways," added Rhoda, "why cheat family and friends from paying proper last respects?"

"— crossed my mind, too," said Arthur.

"Furthermore, he had no right to do what he did."

"None whatsoever," agreed Arthur. "A man legally dead, after all."

"You know where we're gonna sit tonight?" asked Rhoda.

"Loges."

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"Yes. Costly, but smoking."

In the sink, the flame died. Rhoda slapped at the black ash, lightly, with her forefinger. Arthur turned on the faucet. Suddenly, the sink was clear.

The undertaker and his wife washed their hands together, and went to the movies. They arrived in time to see not only the newsreel and the cartoon, but Coming Attractions, as well.

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A brief and vivid glimpse of a key-incident in a war to come . . . and not the war you may (at least consciously) be fearing.

Hour Without Glory

by ROBERT ABERNATHY

ALL THROUGH THE CHILLING AFTERnoon, under gray skies and blowing clouds, the rainy fields had been plowed and trampled by the army in retreat. On every way through the rolling hills to the river bottom, machines and men had churned the red Oklahoma earth into a footingless swamp.

The General's jeep lay askew in the ditch where it had slid. The General's right leg was buckled beneath it — broken or not, he couldn't be sure, but he had made painfully certain that he wasn't going to be able to free himself without help. He'd made sure, too, that he couldn't reach the flare pistol in the jeep, beside the dead driver.

His leg had been numb, but now it hurt abominably. Nobody had come near since, half an hour ago by the General's wristwatch, the enemy planes had made their final pass and screamed off into the overcast.

The rumble of movement and explosions far away, dominated by the gruff thunder of heavy artillery firing from its new emplacements beyond the river, told him that the rearguard action went on. But it was lonely here.

He should have been over there, in contact with his staff and field commanders — directing the action, whipping the army into defensive positions along the Red River line. The battle to northward was catastrophically lost, but if they could stop the enemy's advance at the river they could probably hold till spring. They had to. Winter was already in the air, and winter was a desperate threat to an army beaten and pushed — mud and more mud, struggles with the motorized equipment, freezing bivouacs, the blizzards from the plains . . .

He should have been over there, making the decision that now *had* to be made.

The General clamped his teeth together hard and wrenched again at his pinioned leg. The slippery red mud gave him no purchase. Pain flared before his eyes, and he fought back a feeling of swimming away.

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He gave it up, panting, and instead raised himself as high as he could.

He couldn't see far. A little way off stood a burned-out truck, slewed crosswise of the ruts, abandoned by the survivors if there had been any. Farther away, a farmhouse was still burning, flames briskly crisping, blackening, unattended. . . . Flames eating, perhaps, at solid planks and beams first raised by folk who had ventured into this country when it was raw and new, when the danger was of Indians riding when the moon was full. . . . No sign of life, nothing to show if anyone had remained in the house when the enemy planes came whooping in with their rockets and their napalm. But it was possible; these people clung hard to their red land.

"Here!" shouted the General hoarsely. "*Help!*"

No answer but the whistling roar of a flight of aircraft somewhere beyond the cloud blanket. Enemy planes, most likely.

Had that been his fatal mistake — underestimating the enemy's air superiority? Or . . . But there was no use thinking along those lines just now.

The General's leg throbbed, and he was beginning to feel a little lightheaded.

Cold comfort to recall that, by the illogic of military history, commanders seemed to loom largest in defeat. Hannibal . . . Rommel . . . Robert E. Lee . . . Even Napoleon, about whom everyone first remembers Waterloo and then perhaps the retreat from Moscow.

But the General had learned and believed that the end of war is victory: victory as quick, economical, and decisive as possible, achieved by skilled use of the uttermost force.

The uttermost force . . . but in *this* war . . .

This isn't the war I was trained to fight. Not the one we were looking toward when I was at West Point, nor yet the one we expected to have to fight when I got my first star . . . Not the war with Russia, nor the war with Germany, nor anything like that.

No; this is the war that couldn't happen: the Second American Civil War.

No doubt when it was over the historians would explain neatly how inevitable it had been. But on its very eve it had still seemed inconceivable . . . even though you knew it had happened before, and that, by the cold thousand-year record of the books, it was an almost unheard-of thing for any great nation to live through a century without being torn asunder by the winds of wrath and rebellion.

Some things were politics. A good soldier had as little as possible to do with politics, and fought, when he must, for the true and lawful government of the United States of America. But now familiar landmarks had been displaced or defaced, and the truth made hard to read.

In the First Civil War, he had sometimes thought bitterly, it must

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have been simpler. A man's loyalty was to his native state or to the Union, and the issues were plain.

But . . . if the President's death had been what they said it was . . . if the Vice President had been, as they claimed, an incompetent hack, a tool for traitors . . . Even a soldier had to decide, as Lee had decided for Virginia.

Like things had happened before, and often. But even history has its firsts. And never before had the storm of anger broken upon a nation which could be so mighty in its anger. Never had the stakes been piled so high on the decisions which, when things had gone too far, must be made on the fighting front.

A misty rain was beginning to fall once more, obscuring nearer and nearer distances, drenching and chilling.

For no good reason a tune ran through the General's head, with some words of a song that had been a jukebox nuisance you couldn't help hearing two or three years ago:

Don't be afraid
Of the rain and the snow —
Turn on the lights,
Turn on the radio. . . .

The gray mist washed out all color in the world around, save for the raw red of the torn earth close at hand. And, still unwillingly, the General's mind slipped back to something seen less than an hour ago from his jeep as it slithered along the road in the path of the retreat, minutes before the air attack.

At the crossing of a major highway — recognizable now by upended blocks of concrete around which the lighter traffic maneuvered with angry motor noise — what had been a man, fallen in the fighting that had swept back and forth past this point. Insignia of rank and allegiance were no longer distinguishable, nothing was left but a red smear in the red wallow for half a dozen yards, across the intersection where for hours the heavy weapons carriers had passed, the self-propelled guns, the half-tracks, and the tanks.

Don't be afraid . . .

As you used to see, on peacetime pavements, a rabbit or a cat, pounded flat, ignored in the hurry, smeared.

Turn on the lights . . .

Easy now. Can't go getting delirious.

The General shook his head to rid it of the tune and the memory that somehow went together, and lifted himself dizzily to peer through the curtain of rain.

It was as if life had been swept from this land, this vacuum-pocket sucked empty by the withdrawal of the army. But the distant firing affirmed the continuing of life and war, in darkness and harsh weather.

The rain and the snow . . .

That damned tune again.

Turn on the radio . . .

There was a two-way radio in the jeep, but even if it was still in shape to be turned on it was out of his reach, as was the flare pistol, every chance of summoning aid.

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If he *didn't* get out —

Command of the army would of course devolve upon the Brigadier. Very clearly he pictured the Brigadier. A good man. A man of soldierly competence and great precision, whose knowledge of Army regulations was phenomenal. He had graduated second in the West Point class in which the General-to-be was first. He wore glasses now; they somehow always managed to hide his eyes.

Very clearly too he saw how the Brigadier would make the necessary decisions — make *the* decision.

The army is retreating — let's face it, the army is routed, and it is doubtful whether we can make good the river crossing and dig in soon enough, even if the overcast continues to hamper the enemy air through tomorrow.

Sound tactics dictate the use of all available fire power against the enemy concentrations. Available fire power includes atomic weapons. Such weapons are within striking distance of the front and Supreme Headquarters has placed their use at the discretion of the field commander.

And the war would be almost over. Intelligence believed that the enemy was relatively deficient in tactical atomic weapons but had succeeded in seizing control of more of the original strategic stockpile. So no doubt the enemy would be the first — once the tacit agreement had been broken — to take the next logical step and bring the big ones into play, the hydrogen bombs, the cobalt bombs, the dusts. . . . But there would be plenty to go round.

Don't be afraid
Of the rain and the snow. . . .

And a red smear in the mud of an Oklahoma crossroads. The politicians messed their mess, and in the end a soldier had to decide.

Now, at this hour — when the warring factions stood over against one another like two who were once friends, and have quarreled and struck blows and drawn blood, but now stand face to face on the brink of the instant when this one or that will utter the unforgivable insult, commit the unforgivable deed, after which there will be no turning back. . . .

He'd stuck to what he believed in. Even though there had been bad moments. He had come close to resigning his post when the Russian military observers had showed up with their sly expectant Asiatic grins and prying eyes and credentials from Supreme Headquarters . . . but he could understand the situation as a soldier: that was the price of the Russian grain ships docking at Galveston, at New York and San Francisco, of the full stomach the armies needed sorely since the front had swept across the wheat country. But he wished they could have got by without making a deal with the goddamn Reds. (And of course there were the rumors that the Russians were supplying the enemy too — underhandedly, through their satellites.)

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A war is meant to be won.

But this is the wrong war. The enemy is American, too. And we never made those *weapons to use on each other!*

But what about the enemy? Rabble, led by rabble! Scarcely one of the leaders was what might be called a gentleman; he had even heard that some of them were foreign-born. Rather than allow the greatest nation on earth to fall into such hands —

Americans? They're just people, like anybody else. Bring on the bombs!

The Brigadier wouldn't go through any such complicated and tormented reflections. He would see the military problem more clearly, perhaps, in isolation; the larger, that is to say strategic, implications were the concern of Supreme Headquarters and the Government — but those authorities had already passed the responsibility down the chain of command.

The General was shocked alert by a gathering, drumming roar that came nearer, was passing overhead. No plane, that. He gazed upward and saw the helicopter flying, shadowy in the low grayness that was its safety from enemy planes, whirring steadily on and fading from sight as he watched helpless. . . . He knew they were looking for him, but they couldn't hope to spot him under these conditions; they'd be expecting him, if still alive, to use the flare pistol.

The helicopter's noise followed it out of hearing. The General sank weakly back and tried to relax in the mud and the mizzle.

Nothing he could do. He would have to lie here till the enemy's patrols combed the area, then take his chances as a prisoner. No more decisions to make. His head buzzed feverishly.

Don't be afraid . . .

"Shut up!" snapped the General.

A voice that was not his own asked, "What say?"

He twisted round. On the crumbled shoulder of the road above him stood two scarecrow figures. They were a man perhaps in his thirties, lanky, unkempt, and unshaven, and a boy of twelve or thirteen, with hair, straw-colored like the man's, falling into a thin unhealthy-looking face. They were almost identically dressed in threadbare overalls. But the man's face was expressionless as he looked down at the overturned vehicle and its prisoner; the boy's was alive with interest.

Civilians. Jetsam of the war zone. The man might even be a deserter, from either side.

The General felt suddenly faint. He made an uncertain gesture, mumbled, "Get . . . off me . . ."

"Hold on there a minute," said the lanky man unexcitedly. "Have to git a pole." It was only as he turned away that the General noticed that one faded blue sleeve of the ragged shirt hung empty.

They came back with a charred piece of timber, and worked it under

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the capsized jeep. When they began prying up, the General did faint. He never knew just how the one-armed man and the boy managed to lift the wreck and at the same time drag him out from under. But he was close enough to consciousness to know, when he came to lying on the edge of the roadway, that it had been only a minute or two.

The one-armed man was squatting on his heels beside him. He said conversationally, "Me and my nephew — he's my brother's boy —we heard you hollerin'. We was in the storm cellar —"

"We're gonna live there now," said the boy breathlessly. "Since the house burnt down."

"Guess so," admitted the man. "Ain't no point to buildin' again till things git quieter round here."

The General strove to sit up. "Take it easy," warned the one-armed man. "Your leg's broke." He turned abruptly to the boy, who was staring fascinatedly at the stars on the General's shoulder. "Run over to the house and hunt me up a couple of boards. 'Bout yay long." He held his hands apart. "Scoot!"

He looked after the boy, said reflectively, "Ain't nobody else to look after him, since his ma died. My brother don't know that yet. He had to go fight."

Not a word about which side his brother was fighting on, or where his own sympathies, if any, lay. The ragged blue denim of the farmer betrayed nothing. This country here had been fought over before, and here — indeed, anywhere — you couldn't be sure who was who, outside the uniform.

The General was strangely reminded of another man whose loyalty had not been ascertainable — one whose flesh and blood was blended with the churned earth of the crossroads a few miles north. . . .

Then, with a jarring sense of reversal, as if while looking into a mirror he had all at once found himself looking out of it, he was aware that the one-armed man was regarding him as just such another, an anonymous fragment of debris spilled out of the great confusion — was not asking him for whom or against whom he fought, or why.

But that was absurdly wrong, for the General was a man of importance, a leader in the war that still boomed and shuddered among the hills by the river.

It was a long way, the General realized, from West Point to the red earth farmlands — a longer way than from the General to his now-victorious opponent in command of the enemy forces; farther, probably, than from the politicians on one side to the politicians on the other.

The General said hoarsely, urgently, "I have to get back to the army. Can you . . ."

The other merely eyed him. "Your leg's broke," he said patiently.

The General frowned. Now, in a manner of speaking, he recognized

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his rescuers. These were the people whom the psychological warfare boys, back at Headquarters in their clean freshly pressed uniforms, called politically apathetic. They didn't see the issues; they thought of the war as a storm to be waited out as luck or providence might permit. When it had passed they would rebuild their houses.

In a psych warfare course the General had taken there had been recommendations for combating such apathy. But none of them came back to him now; he didn't try very hard to recall them. With a feeling that, with a sort of dulled horror, he recognized as relief, he saw that his situation was unchanged. It was still a matter of waiting for the enemy's patrols.

By then, most likely, the order would have gone out, and off there beyond the river, in Texas, certain big drab trucks would be driven to positions well back of the front, and on them men (not soldiers really, but technicians in uniform, strange new men with wiring diagrams for brains) would be making final adjustments of devices over which the intelligence and skill of a united America had labored long to make them the most lethal and infallible things of their kind in all the world. Finally someone would press a button. . . . But it wasn't his responsibility any more, he thought with a lightened heart and a crawling sickness of shame.

He closed his eyes, weak and dizzy, shutting out the sight of the one-armed farmer silently watching him.

Don't be afraid
Of the rain and the snow . . .

They'd sung that song in the year before the great confusion began, at a time when men sat safe in their warm houses, with their warm wives, and the wind howled no warning — or did it?

Turn on the lights,
Turn on the radio. . . .

There were few lights in the cities these days and the radios broke their silence only to squawk grim bulletins from the shifting fronts. Somehow the formula hadn't worked. Maybe the historians would figure it out. If they survived and if enough of the other people survived to pay their salaries while they figured. If we got another chance.

We? thought the General hazily. *Just who are* WE?

Then he heard the noise of the helicopter coming back.

He opened his eyes and sat up with an effort that sent fiery splinters of pain through his leg. The one-armed man said, "Here, now," and the boy stared, just come back out of breath holding two uneven lengths of plank.

"Quick!" said the General. The last chance was coming, whirring swiftly with the vanes of the copter. "The flare pistol. In the front seat of the jeep. Bring it to me!"

"You better lay still," said the man reasonably.

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The General's eyes raked him, saw he wouldn't be moved in time, swiveled to the boy and fastened fiercely on him. "You! Bring me that pistol. On the double! *Run!*"

The boy dropped the boards he carried, whirled, and ran — obeying the loud voice, the parade-ground voice, which has been thus obeyed ever since the Sumerians invented close-order drill.

The General aimed the flare pistol skyward, fighting to keep his hand steady, and jerked the trigger. A great rose of unearthly light bloomed in the darkening clouds overhead; and seconds later he heard the propeller-sound change its beat and begin circling back.

The one-armed man stood up. He gazed thoughtfully at the noisy sky, and bent, still without haste, to pick up the bits of plank. "You won't be needin' these," he surmised, and tucked them under his arm as he turned away.

"Wait . . ." muttered the General. "I . . ." But weakness flooded over him again, and he couldn't think of what he wanted to say. Only the boy glanced back at him briefly. They trudged away across the fields, growing indistinct and merging with the dusk as the helicopter descended.

The General gulped scalding black coffee, made a fly-brushing motion at the medic working on his leg, and snapped at the Brigadier: "Well, let's have it! Report!"

"Are you sure you're able —" The Brigadier looked stiff and uncomfortable, facing his mud-daubed superior.

"I'm able and I'm in command here. What have you done about Plan C?"

The Brigadier said shakily, "The units are in place and ready to fire. I've been holding off as long as possible; but for getting the word you'd been found, I'd have had to consider it my duty —"

"Cancel that consideration. Order the units withdrawn to where they won't be overrun in case of a breakthrough. But there won't be any breakthrough; we're going to hold this line . . . with conventional weapons."

He didn't need to add that there would be dead and more dead along that river line — or that there had been courts-martial before now for generals who had gambled with the safety of their armies.

The Brigadier stared at him; then the color came slowly back into his face, and he said, "Yes, sir," in the tone of "Thank you, God!" And the General realized that he'd never really known the man at all.

But to himself the General thought: *So, for the present . . . Don't be afraid, everybody, turn on the lights, make a brave noise in the teeth of the storm. But how long can we hold — you, and I, and the enemy over there, however many are left of us anywhere — how long can all of us hold the line?*

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"Horror is pretty well the strongest card in the science fiction writer's hand . . . in this department, science fiction is capable of leaving the thriller and the ghost-story streets behind." This is the verdict of English critic Edmund Crispin (certainly an unselfish one, since Crispin himself has contrived some fine ghost-cum-thriller horror, especially in SUDDEN VENGEANCE), *and a verdict confirmed by 1955's two specialized anthologies; Conklin's* SCIENCE FICTION TERROR TALES *and Wollheim's* TERROR IN THE MODERN VEIN. *Here's further evidence, in a fast, urgent, compulsively readable story of a blank in memory, a signed contract, and the singular doom of the party of the second part.*

The Contract

by BRYCE WALTON

THIS TIME, HE THOUGHT, I'VE BEEN in the bottle too long.

There was something too old, too familiar, something dusty and time-locked about the room as he blinked at the signs.

The bottles. All empty. Beer, bourbon, wine finally. Mail piled up inside the door under the mail slot. His beard too long this time, long and dirty, and it itched as he lay there feeling the emptiness all around.

He'd had the smaller horrors already, the things coming out of the walls, his friends' voices coming from the false fireplace. The naked women laughing and dancing round and round on the ceiling waving full bottles. That moment when the wall shivered and he touched it and it rippled under his hand as though it were covered with damp fur.

Now the real one, the big one. He slouched into the bathroom and studied his puffed face in the mirror. He doused himself with cold water, returned to the living room and shuffled through the stack of old mail.

A dusty kind of still afternoon filtered through the Venetian blind. Never much sound of life down on North Berendo of an afternoon. If you went up on the roof you could see the Freeway traffic streaming across the smog-draped palm trees toward Highland. But Hollywood Boulevard was invisible, and here there were hardly any sounds at all.

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Only a fly buzzing behind the blind. The ice cream cart tinkling softly a moment then gone like the memory of an old music box. The water faucet in the kitchen that Laura had raised so much hell about dripping and dripping. That and the loud throbbing sound that emptiness makes when you're crawling out into it again and wondering how long you can stay.

He remembered for the first time in years how his Mother had written him from Blythedale, Missouri almost every other day right up until the day she died. And that as far as he knew she had been the last living relative of Hal Bain.

Bill, another bill, plenty of bills. They could wait. He figured he had maybe a hundred and fifty bucks left in his checking account. Maybe that wasn't even there now. Hal never remembered much about what he did when he was on a toot. He called Don Steiger over at the First City Trust.

"Nope, Hal, sorry. You only have one solitary buck left. I assumed you wanted to keep your account open."

"Good God, you're kidding!"

"You insisted," Steiger said.

"But that's a damn indecent thing to do!"

"You insisted. And anyway, there were all those unpaid bills. Your account just paid them off. Your lawyer, Richman, he OK'd it. You'd given him the authority. He said —"

"Sure, but I asked you not to let me have any money when I was on a bender."

"You were very insistent, Hal."

"My old pal," Hal whispered. "You bastard. I don't have a cent. Nothing even to hock. Listen, what about — ?"

"Can't do it, Hal. You know I can't. Bank won't do it. And I just went in the hole six hundred worth for my wife's hospital siege."

"Don —"

"Call me later, will you? I'm all tied up here."

Hal hung up. Sure, old buddy of mine. Old college chum, Steiger. Steiger had even refused him a loan back when it might have made all the difference, back there a couple of years ago at the crossroads when he needed that loan and could have rolled five grand into big money.

Steiger was a no-good bastard.

Legal document from his lawyer, Lionel Richman, explaining how Hal's and his ex-wife's communal property was being disposed of. That's easy. I'm cleaned out and I'm glad, while Laura's being the gay divorcee down at Laguna Beach. If I'm lucky I'll never hear from or of her again.

An advertisement, a blotter card with Berendo Liquor Store sending its fondest greetings and expressing its appreciation for your patronage. Love and kisses from Mario Fontini.

Hal called Mr. Fontini.

"No, don't even think about it, friend."

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"But I told you not to charge any more stuff to me."

"Forget it, dear friend Mr. Bain. I know you pay one of these days. Believe me, it means nothing to me."

"But I owe you several hundred bucks already."

"Someday you pay," Mr. Fontini said. "You want something now, Mr. Bain? Maybe nice pick-me-up?"

"No, thanks."

"You just call, and I send it right over."

Hal went back to the pile of mail. Why hadn't any of the bank money gone to Fontini? Fontini really didn't care, did he?

A bill for the rent. That hadn't been paid either, but then it was only a week late, and Barney was a nice landlord. He would lay off for a long time if he had to. Barney had always been a pal and a reasonable man.

No note from Maurey Clark over at Acme Used Cars though.

Maurey was always waiting to take Hal back on the lot after a bender like nothing had happened. Always was a little note from Maurey saying hurry back, son, the suckers are waiting, or something like that, and we need you.

This time no note at all from Maurey Clark.

The devil with all of them. They only pitied him now. They were all such good old pals, up to a point. Richman. Even Steiger offering condolences, asking him over evenings. Maurey, Mr. Fontini, Barney, Even Laura trying to help, being nice about it, no hard feelings attitude. "I so much want us to be good friends, Hal. Can't we?"

Nope. What's this? Another note from Richman. Richman and Yankwrench, Attorneys at Law.

August 13, 1956

Mr. Harald Arlington Bain
60 North Berendo
Pagoda Palace Apartments
Hollywood 24, California

Dear Mr. Bain:
This is to remind you that the contract you signed with the Ulysses Import-Export Company calls for you to fulfill your part of the agreement next Thursday the 16th at midnight. If you will refer to the Contract dated March 13, 1954, you will note that you agree to appear here at my office for briefing and other necessary final preparations for your flight. Would you please oblige this request as soon as possible between now and the 16th of August?

That new cute dumb secretary of Lionel's. Formal. Hal hated formality, even from cute dumb secretaries, he thought, as he poured a glass of tomato juice and sipped it. And as for Ulysses Import-Export Company — someone had goofed.

Either the secretary had contacted the wrong Bain, or got some letters mixed up.

The telephone rang.

Bain ran for it as though the phone would never ring again, then

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forced himself to let it ring several times before he picked up the receiver. People probably had the idea that Hal Bain was sitting around singing "all alone by the telephone" just waiting for someone to call.

"Hal," Lionel Richman said shrilly. "Didn't you get my note?"

"Sure, Laura gets everything. I wanted it that way."

"I mean about the Contract, with Ulysses?"

"Yeah, I got that too."

"But this is Thursday, man, this is the 16th!"

"What's the gag? You know I'm allergic to high places. I wouldn't go up in a plane for love or money, especially love."

"This is no joke. Remember signing that contract? These guys from Ulysses have been pestering me. I'd appreciate it a lot if you would get over here on the double and pick the rest of this stuff up."

"What stuff?"

"Some kind of packet Ulysses mailed in. Contains last-minute briefing papers and so forth. Very important."

"Check with your new office playmate," Hal said. "She probably made a mistake. Somebody did."

"There hasn't been any mistake!"

"I never heard of the Ulysses Import-Export Company."

"But I was there at your apartment when you signed it. I signed it too. I was one of the witnesses."

"Sign off now, will you? I've got a bad head."

"But my clients insist. Your flight's at midnight!"

Hal felt grimy, sweaty and raw. He needed a bath, a shave and a thick rare steak.

"Lay off now," he said. "I don't know what you're talking about, and I sure don't give a damn either."

"Please, will you look through your papers, Hal? You'll find it there somewhere. I'm looking at the duplicate right here now. Your signature. Mine too, and Laura's, and—"

Hal hung up. The door chimes banged him out of the cold shower. Dragging a dirty bathtowel after him, Hal ran to answer it. It was a cop. A young cop on the shy side and he was embarrassed. "I'm supposed to tell you to move, Mr. Bain. Mr. Harcourt says you've been disturbing the peace and that you've had your eviction notice long enough."

Hal slammed the door and snapped the nightlock. That was crazy. Eviction notice, from Barney Harcourt? That was crazy. Just plain crazy. Barney had let him go for months sometimes. When Hal had a party, Barney came in and drank, raised more hell than all the others combined.

Barney had even loaned Hal a little once instead of squawking about the overdue rent. Hal jumped as the telephone rang again. His hand shook as he jerked up the receiver.

"Hal, please, will you get down here to my office on the double?"

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"Stop bugging me. I don't feel so good."

"But my clients insist. They're very insistent."

"So am I."

"They've been calling me all day."

Richman sounded real funny, hardly sounded like Lionel Richman at all.

"I said to stop bugging me."

"Hal."

"I didn't sign —"

"But you did. I wasn't the only witness. Did you look for your copy of the Contract?"

Hal said quietly, "I'm not going over this again, Richman. I never signed any contract with Ulysses Import-Export Company. N-e-v-e-r. Get it, shyster. Never!"

"It was there at your house. The big blowout when you swung that double deal for Acme. Maybe you were too loaded, don't remember. But you signed the contract. Gag or no gag, that contract's legal. Now you come on over here so we can —"

Hal slammed the receiver down and ran back into the shower. He was starting to plug in the electric razor when the phone rang again. This time it was Maurey Clark's secretary over at Acme Used Cars on Sunset and Highland.

Cute kid, very friendly indeed, too, on more than one occasion. Now she sounded like a total stranger.

". . . but Mr. Clark says that we just don't need another salesman now, Mr. Bain."

"Let me speak to Maurey, will you?"

"He's not in now. But he was explicit, Mr. Bain. And there just won't be any purpose in talking with Mr. Clark. He was real explicit like, and he said actually we're laying off over a third of our most experienced salesman because of the regular fall slump —"

"Let me speak to that big-bellied fink!"

"Mr. Bain!"

"Who needs his lousy used cars?" Hal was slamming his flattened hand on the wall. "Who needs him? Who needs him? Who needs any of you?"

He sat down on the couch and felt his eyes beginning to smart and his throat choking up.

He grabbed up the phone, dialed.

"I'd like to speak with Mr. Clark please. . . . Hello, Maurey, this is your top salesman, that's right, old Hal Bain. It's OK, forget it. I'm afraid I won't be coming back to Acme."

"Well, that's too bad."

"Isn't it? Well, you see, Maurey, I've got something else coming up in a couple of weeks. Just going to goof around till then, take it easy."

"Well, OK, Hal. See you around."

"Thanks."

It had hardly sounded like Maurey Clark at all.

I'll move, get out of town, clear out of the country, Hal thought. Comb a beach down in Baca some-

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where. That guy had told him you could live down there on a dollar a day, if you could live just on lobster. I don't like lobster, Hal thought. Hate seafood. Especially anything in a shell.

He sat there like a rock uneasily balanced on the side of a hill, tapping his foot up and down on the floor. He felt the emptiness, the dry nakedness, the sterile dustiness of the late afternoon. The truth was he didn't really feel like there was anyplace left for him to go.

He sprawled out and put his hand over his eyes.

Sometime later he knew it was dark and he thought he heard footsteps in the hall. He lay there with his eyes closed, listened, while the fly kept on buzzing and the faucet in the kitchen dripped its repetitive Morse code. He turned quickly toward the door.

He surely heard something. But then when he listened he didn't seem to hear anything. Movement out there, he could swear to that, but just when he thought he heard something, everything seemed to stop.

Everything but the fly buzzing, the faucet dripping, the memory of a bell on an ice cream cart tinkling, a music box tinkling bittersweet on Laura's bureau that night when the last light went out.

On and on and on . . .

The knock was soft. Not hesitant, but muffled, as though someone wore thick gloves over his knuckles. He stared at the door. The cop come back? Nobody evicts me. That's just too damn ridiculous anyway, the idea of Barney calling the cop like that.

Funny how it was that he just lay there staring at the door. He didn't want to answer it. It could be any one or more of a half a dozen people who had been dropping in on him since he married Laura, first congratulating him on his marriage, and then later offering condolences when Laura left him, and all of them pretending they weren't aware of his turning into a rum-bum.

Fontini, and Maurey, and Barney and Richman and Steiger, and Laura. Even Laura dropped in a few times. And that screwball Laura had bouncing around her a little before the big split. Some guy named Jackson.

"*Just leave it to Jackson.*"

Leave what to Jackson?

The clowning, man, the clowning. Jackson's the funniest man in the world. ". . . *ha, ha, you've sealed your fate, Mr. Bain.*"

Could be any of those people. Hal had never had many friends. But the few so-called friends he had, from a used car tycoon through clowns and cuties and liquor store owners, sure had paid him some attention.

But now there was some other feeling and he didn't know what it was. Where did this stillness come from, this frozen, this fear kind of feeling? He'd been evicted, been broke, been out of jobs before.

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The muffled knock came again, and he stood up on shaky legs and tied the bathtowel around his hips. He went to the door and listened.

"Who is it?" he heard himself ask. But why? What did he care who it was? So it was the cop, or maybe Maurey. Maybe it was Fontini's delivery boy with a nice bottle of aged bourbon.

"Mr. Bain?"

"I'm taking a bath now."

"We're from the Ulysses Import-Export Company, Mr. Bain."

He had hold of the nightlock, but he didn't open the door. His hands were shaking badly again, and his skin was sticky. He had heard the words distinctly, yet there was the feeling he hadn't really *heard* anything.

This blurred impression of foreign accents, but not any kind of accents he'd ever heard before. Like the voices you hear in a hangover dream. You hear them but they aren't quite real enough. But you've heard them. You've sure heard them just the same.

Hal whispered, "What do you guys want?"

"To talk with you, Mr. Bain."

"What about?"

"The Contract, Mr. Bain."

"I explained that to Richman. I didn't sign any such contract."

"I think we can refresh your memory, Mr. Bain. If you will just open the door —"

Hal didn't want his memory refreshed. If he never remembered anything about yesterday again, he would be better off, he thought.

"Would you be good enough to open the door, Mr. Bain?"

"No, I would not be good enough. But I'll tell you what I am going to do if you guys don't stay off my back. I'll call the cops."

"But it's almost flight time, Mr. Bain."

"You guys better take off right now."

Hal backed, then turned, ran into the bedroom, shut and locked the bedroom door. He lay across the bed and lifted the side of the venetian blind and he saw them, two of them. Maybe more than two, he wasn't quite sure how many, but they seemed to be walking across the street, and then they seemed to be standing over there under a palm tree like decorations around the base of a skinny pineapple.

Hal watched. They waited and they never moved once. But there was something blurred about their appearance. It was a clear moonlit night. Up the street less than half a block was a bright streetlight. Somehow Hal thought they should be more distinct standing there. They ought to have moved a little. They seemed first one way then another, but never any one way he could put his finger on, like someone walking through a hall of trick mirrors.

He groaned as he pressed his face down into the bedspread still smelling faintly of lavender perfume. This

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is the last time, he thought. The last orgy of self-pity. The last slide into the bottle. The last weeping over the loss of Laura, the whole bit. Over and done with, he'd had it.

He looked again. They were still waiting.

He turned away from the window, sat stiffly, precariously on the edge of the bed. His throat was dry. Call the cops? He thought of the cop who had just been there, he thought of his old pal, Barney, calling the cops. The eviction notice.

He started for the door. He'd go downstairs, have a talk with Barney. Maybe I did something this time, Hal thought, that I can't remember. Maybe I broke one of Barney's phony chinese dolls.

But he hesitated at the door. He thought about those jokers waiting across the street. He didn't know how many there were. Maybe one or more of them were still waiting in the hall. He listened. He couldn't hear anything.

He looked up the number, called Barney's first floor apartment.

". . . I've had it, Hal. No hard feelings, but this is it. I don't want to call the cops. If you'll just clear out —"

"But this is it, Barney, for me too. I've had it too. This is really it. You don't have to worry about the lousy rent. I can get —"

"You can get out now, and I won't call the cops. I'm not running a sanitarium."

Hal paused. "As a matter of fact, I was going to give you notice, Barney. This makes it easier."

"I'm glad it makes things easier, Hal."

Hal hung up. Barney hadn't sounded like Barney. Nobody sounded the same anymore. But then maybe for the first time they sounded right. The true colors of the bastards coming out at last.

When he looked out the window the guys were still waiting.

Contract? March 13, 1954. He might possibly have signed something without remembering it. He hadn't boozed up heavy in those days. Those were the good gravy-train days. That was before Laura's sudden dissatisfaction and subsequent runout. In those days Laura was full of eagerness, love and laughter. And Hal was pulling down sometimes three or four hundred a week in commissions alone over at Acme Used Cars.

Still, even when he'd had only a few drinks he'd had this tendency to forget things. So just maybe . . .

But so what? These guys were pushing like a draft board. Hal nudged his mind about March 13, 1954. He thought of Laura. He didn't want to think of Laura. He felt foolish, a little scared again now, because he seemed to be admitting there might have been a contract and he was sure there hadn't been any contract.

He started looking. His hands shook badly now. He needed a steak. He needed a drink. He thought all

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at once how much he wanted a drink and the fear ballooned in him and drove him harder as he looked with a sweating almost frantic intensity to prove there was no contract. Those boxes under the bed. Dust flew up, choked him. He threw papers and forgotten letters and some pictures over the floor, over the bed. Nothing there. A box on top shelf of the closet.

Silly sentimental mementos. Only Laura would have saved such stuff. Canes from the circus. Score card from miniature golf at Santa Monica. Ticket stubs from *Medea*. A souvenir corncob pipe from a Navajo reservation. The stuff spilled over the floor.

Football ticket stub, the Rosebowl game. Colored cards of rushing rivers from the Idaho camping trip. A dusty kewpie doll. A few broken pieces of a ceramic ashtray Laura had made when she took up ceramics. "*Anything to avoid boredom, you know, Hal.*"

Hal stumbled back and sat on the bed. The stillness oozing in again, out of walls and floor, and the dripping faucet and the memory of a tinkling ice cream cart coming back, making an island in the middle of dusty stillness.

He stared at the unfolding paper, thick impressive paper now that he'd found it at the bottom of the shoebox. A duplicate of the original. But his name was at the bottom all right, unmistakably his name, and all the witness's names too:

Mrs. Laura Bain
Mr. Lionel Richman
Mr. Bernard Harcourt
Mr. Mario Fontini
Mr. Maurey Clark
Mr. Don L. Steiger
Mr. H. B. Jackson

The fine print blurred, went out of focus, and never came back clearly again. Lot of fine print you never quite read on a contract. Especially a contract that was only a lousy joke. Hal tried to laugh as he called Richman. "This is too damn much!"

"Have they contacted you?" Richman almost yelled.

"Oh sure, only I found the contract. My — Laura put it away with some junk. I'd forgotten all about it. I was a little loaded that night. I remember it now."

"You won't have time to come over here now, Hal. But now that they've contacted you directly, you won't —"

"It hasn't really been direct. I haven't talked to them yet, as a matter of fact. I didn't let them in."

"What? What about your directions?"

"I'm going to give you and your jokesters some directions, shyster. Go to hell."

"You're supposed to meet the Ulysses representatives at Franklin and Highland at 11 tonight. It's almost 11 now."

"OK, what's the gag?"

"You ask me?"

"The joke, Richman. The big stale joke. The laugh's over."

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"All right, it did seem like a gag that night. It even looks like a gag right now. But it's legal and my clients are serious fellows."

Hal rubbed at his throat. "To the Moon. That's what it says."

"Yes."

"I'm going to the Moon at midnight. Now that's a gag. Not only that, it's a damn mothy one too."

"So it looks like a gag."

"Nobody's flying to the Moon at midnight. Maybe they never will, but right now it's a gag. You come over here and let's have a drink on it, and you bring the bottle. OK, Richman? Someone's had their cornball joke, so now let's have a drink on it."

"But the Contract's legal, Hal!"

"Get this now," Hal said. "Some people were here that night. Like this joker, Jackson, Laura's clowning pal. The guy who flashed the phony contract and made a big thing out of it. Get your reservations, everybody, he said. And be ready for your flight to the stars. But first, folksies, the Moon. I signed it. It was a joke. Everybody was around witnessing it and laughing. And Laura laughing the loudest. 'It's going to be real rough waiting for you, honey,' Laura said. That's all. I didn't even read the damned thing. I just signed it. I forgot about the gag."

"You signed it. It's legal. Notice this clause: ' . . . *under no circumstances will I allow anything whatever, even a possible change in my own attitude, to interfere with my carrying out the above stated agreement with* Ulysses Import-Export Company.' Now, Hal, if they want to enforce this agreement they certainly, certainly can. Are you able to stand up to a big lawsuit, Hal?"

"Nobody gets sued these days for not going to the Moon."

"All I'm saying is the Contract's legal."

"But it's a lousy joke. I'll tell you what act three in this big funny joke is going to be. One more call from you or any of these other misplaced trick-or-treat creeps, by phone or any other way, and I call the cops."

"All right, Hal. But as your legal advisor, I can tell —"

Hal dropped the receiver on Richman and went to the door. He hesitated, then unlocked it, opened it slightly, then looked down the stretch of hall bathed in red light and shadowed with phony chinese bric-a-brac including a plaster Buddha with its gold paint chipping away and showing the plaster beneath.

The Pagoda Palace Apartments were old, mildewed. They reminded you of some other time. Maybe of a cheaper, gaudier, even phonier time, but a more gullible time too, back there when you could believe in Theda Bara, and Valentino. Before my time, Hal thought. His mother had often talked of those days as though she still believed in them. She'd been enthralled with Hollywood when she came visiting once.

Now Hal had wished more than

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once that he had never left the Midwest and come to Hollywood at all.

He saw their shadows in the hall.

He slammed the door, locked it, then sat down on the couch. His head throbbed. He couldn't remember ever needing a drink so much as he needed one now. But every bottle in the place was empty. Dry empty.

Again he had the crazy sensation of hearing them out there, and then when he concentrated on listening, not hearing anything. He dialed the operator and she connected him with the local precinct station.

". . . but what kind of gag, Mr. Bain?"

"I told you."

Pleasant voiced cop. Businesslike and patient. He just wanted all the facts. Probably filling out an official form there on his desk, getting all the facts. Hal reached over, moved the venetian blind. They were waiting now just outside the window.

"You signed this contract to go to the Moon, right?"

"That's right."

"It was a gag?"

"What do you think?"

"And they won't drop it, that right?"

"Right. They follow me, call me on the phone. They're standing right outside my window now!"

"Friends of yours, Mr. Bain?"

"I wouldn't say so."

"Their names, Mr. Bain. Descriptions."

"Well . . ."

"Mr. Bain, do you really want to swear out a complaint against — whoever it is?"

"That's what I said."

"But if it's just a gag, Mr. Bain, then it seems a little strong, doesn't it? I mean swearing out a complaint."

"This is getting to be a real dirty joke, officer."

"Why don't you talk to them, Mr. Bain? If it's just a gag —"

Hal looked at his watch. Twenty till eleven. He wiped at his face. He leaned against the wall and felt moisture squeeze under his hand.

Closed off. Scared. No contact anymore. None since he'd come out of the weemies this afternoon. There wasn't any contact now either. Couldn't be any, not with a cop, not trying to explain how some jokers were insisting that Bain fly to the Moon at midnight.

"I'm asking you please to send someone over here right away, officer."

Minutes later, five, then ten, then fifteen. No cops. They had several calls. A call from a guy being pestered to go to the Moon would have a low priority.

He knew they were outside his door again now.

He went into the bedroom and locked the door. It was so damn still. He tried to light a cigarette as he sat there looking at all the dusty junk littering the floor, and the empty bottles. The cigarette tasted

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foul and metallic and he smashed it out in the part of the broken ceramic ashtray that he now remembered had been shaped like a human kidney. He saw part of the odd twisted face peering up at him from the smear of smoking ashes.

She had made it for him that Christmas as a matter of fact. "*To my darling husband with love, hugs and kisses, from Laura.*"

He felt dizzy. He sat rigid on the edge of the bed. He was afraid to move. There seemed such a delicate balance all at once to everything around him.

"*I, Harald Arlington Bain, party of the second part, do hereby also agree to sever all obligations and responsibilities to Earthly ties, such as marriage, occupation, agreements, etc. . . .*"

Just a coincidence. My divorce. My getting the boot from Maurey. My notice from Barney Harcourt, and the eviction notice. And Steiger's treatment, the bank account finished. Laura walking out for good. All coincidence.

He still owed Fontini, didn't he? And Barney?

The rest of it, just a coincidence.

He tried to run, but only slid down to one knee on the littered floor, and he still couldn't move of his own free will, not even when they came in, all seven of them, through and in and stood around him and lifted him up. Even then he couldn't seem to move.

Laura, what the hell are you doing here? And Steiger. And you, Fontini? And Maurey and Barney Harcourt and Lionel and — you, especially, Jackson. You little bastard, Jackson, what are you doing here?

None of them said anything. Once out in the dark he tried to get away but there were seven of them, and he was too weak anyway. He struggled, but it didn't mean anything and all the time, somehow, he knew it didn't matter about his struggling. He finally stopped altogether.

It didn't make sense, none of it made any sense at all.

The rocket's dun-colored wall was high in the moonlight and there was no getting around it, it was a real big solid waiting rocket somewhere out in the desert.

Hal was encased now in a bulging pressure suit, all metal, and his head was a big alloy bubble. His helmet plate was steamed, and when he bumped his head against the side there was this noisy rumbling sound. He was laid out on a track and the seven were shoving him through an opening in the rocket wall.

His head started into the hole.

"You bastards," he managed to yell. He didn't even know if they could hear him. He still had some vague idea that it was a gag, a very elaborate joke. "You sure did for me. Between Laura and Jackson and you Maurey, letting me come back, and Fontini giving me all the poison I wanted free, and Steiger and Richman —"

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"Don't blame us. You did it. You wanted to do it and you did, Hal. We just furnished the means. Without us, you would have found some other means."

And another voice said, "Yes, we figured you were the one we wanted. Then we tested you. We were right."

Someone else said. "Yes, you're the one."

"But why me?"

"We wanted someone who was absolutely unimportant to anyone, even himself. Someone who would leave no emptiness or loss in the world. Someone who wouldn't be missed."

"But why," Hal whispered, "why anyone at all?"

"We need a physical sample," a voice said. "To study."

Just then, he knew, really knew for the first time, that maybe it wasn't even an elaborate joke. No joke, maybe no joke, he thought and then somehow he stopped the burst that frothed to soundless bubbles on his lips. His body seemed to swell, trying to burst the walls like a swelling mummy.

A small cylindrical opening appeared in the ship, only a few inches in diameter. He could hear a sort of tinkling sound like an ice cream cart, like that old music box, only getting louder and louder.

And one after the other, the seven shriveled, sort of melted, he thought, and the air whistled and the tinkling seemed changed to a splintery vapor. All at once there were the little balls of light. He could see them.

Seven of them. Seven little pulsing balls of light darting and dancing over the sand. And then *whisssht*, *whisssht*, one after the other, they went *whisssht*, through the little hole into the rocket.

Another door closed. Darkness. No sound. No sight. No awareness of motion. He tried to move, but he was wedged in absolute darkness like ammo in a barrel.

The world rocked. His head drained as though by a suction pump. Seven pulsing balls of light went round and round his head. The tinkling was getting louder again and the seven lights spinning faster until they were fusing round his head in the darkness like the rim of a fiery wheel.

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Playboy, *that lustily illustrated periodical of anti-puritanism, has a pretty taste in fantasy as well as in femininity, and often features stories by F&SF's regular contributors. So I frequently buy the magazine to see what our authors are up to elsewhere . . . and some hours later I usually do get around to reading their stories: and it was thus that I happened on this adroit new variant of the soul-bartering theme. The ever-wandering Mack Reynolds was, when last heard from, in Timbuktu; but he has not lost his knowledge of drinking habits in America — or of devious deception in a more ancient Realm.*

Martinis: 12 to 1

by MACK REYNOLDS

"WE HAVE HERE A TABLE BEARING thirteen martinis," the demon said. "And now into one I add a touch from this vial."

"What zat?"

"Poison. Now I switch the glasses about. Truly, you couldn't remember into which glass I emptied the vial, could you?"

"What's the gag, buddy?"

"The proposition," the demon said, "is quite simple. You take your pick and drink it. For your first choice I give you exactly one hundred dollars."

Alan Sheriff shook his head in an attempt to clear away the fog. "You said, minute ago, you put poison . . ."

"In just one. There are thirteen in all. You choose a glass, you drink it, and I award you with a hundred dollars. If you wish to try again, you receive two hundred, next award is four hundred, and so on. If you lose, the forfeit is your life and your . . . soul."

It took a long moment to assimilate that. "Let's see the century," Sheriff muttered.

The demon brought forth a wallet and selected a bill which he laid on the table, then looked at the other in anticipation.

Sheriff said thickly, "Nothing to lose anyway." He took up the nearest glass, fished the olive out and threw it aside.

The demon smiled politely.

"*Bottoms up!*" Sheriff said, tossing

© *1955, by Playboy; originally titled "Burnt Toast"*

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it off with the practiced stiff-wristed motion of the drinker. He put the glass down, stood swaying in silence.

"Not bad liquor," he said finally. "I needed that."

"The hundred dollars is yours. Would you like to try for two hundred?"

Sheriff looked at the bill. "This is good, eh?"

The demon shifted his shoulders in impatience. "Of course."

Sheriff said, "Suppose I could ask you what this is all about, but the hell with it. So long, sucker."

"I'll still be here tomorrow, Alan Sheriff."

There was a knock and the demon said, "Come in."

Sheriff closed the door behind him. His blood-veined eyes went about the barren hotel room; magnet-drawn, they came to the small table. Twelve cocktail glasses, sweated with cold, sat upon it.

He said tentatively, "I was tight last night . . ."

"The night before last," the demon corrected.

". . . but I wasn't *that* tight. I couldn't have dreamed it, especially the hundred bucks."

"Already gone, I assume," the demon said. "You came to try again?"

"Why'd you give me that hundred? Listen, you haven't got a drink around the place, have you?"

The other seated himself in the room's sole chair, put the tips of his fingers together. "You won the hundred dollars on a wager. As far as a drink is concerned, I am afraid all I have is there." He indicated the table with its burden of twelve glasses.

Sheriff's eyes went from him to the table, back again. He hadn't shaved since last he had been here and the pallor and odor of long weeks of alcohol were on him. He wavered. "I don't remember too well."

"Briefly," the demon said, "I represent interests that desire your immortal soul." He made again the proposition of the previous evening while Sheriff stared at him. When he was finished, his visitor's eyes went again to the table with its twelve glasses.

"Let's see your money," Sheriff said, shaky and unbelieving.

The demon brought forth his wallet, extracted two bills.

Sheriff stepped to the table, reached for a drink. "*Prosit!*" he grunted, bolting it. He waited, then with satisfaction, "Wrong one."

The demon shrugged.

Sheriff said, "If I take another one, how much do I get?"

"Four hundred dollars. You wish to try again?"

"There's eleven glasses left. One poison, eh?"

"That is correct. The odds are with you."

Sheriff grinned sourly, two broken front teeth becoming evident. "Best odds I ever had." He reached out

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quickly, took up another glass, held it in his hand for a moment then drank it as he had the other one with one quick motion. "Four hundred more," he demanded, and received it.

"And now for eight?" the demon prodded.

"Not till I get this spent," Sheriff chortled. "Then I'll be back, sucker." He held up the six hundred dollars he had won, stared at it unbelievingly, clenched it in his fist and stumbled from the room.

The demon looked after him.

"Eight hundred this time," the demon said, the sum ready in his hand, "and the odds are one in ten."

"*Here's to glory!*" Sheriff toasted.

When Alan Sheriff returned, four days later, he was shaven, bathed, attired in gray flannel, his teeth had known a dentist's attention and the shaking of his hands was all but imperceptible.

"You're sober," the demon said.

Sheriff looked at him. The other was medium sized, dressed conservatively. Sheriff said, "You don't look like the devil."

"How am I supposed to look?"

Sheriff scowled at him. "Listen, I sobered myself up, but it's temporary. Just long enough to find out what the hell's going on. What'd you give me that money for?"

The demon explained, still again, the wagers they had made.

Afterward Sheriff said, wonderingly, "My soul, eh? Tell the truth, I didn't think there was any such thing."

"It has been greatly debated," the demon agreed.

"What I can't understand," Sheriff said, "is all this trouble you're going to. You picked me out of the gutter. You would've got my . . . soul . . . anyway."

"You underestimate the efforts of our opposition," the demon sighed. "And you must realize victory is never absolutely assured until the last second of life. Ten minutes after I approached you, you might have decided upon reform." He twisted his mouth sardonically.

Sheriff shook his head while saying, "I still don't get this . . . this system of trying to get my . . . soul."

The demon had seated himself in the arm chair, now he shrugged. "Each person in his time is confronted with his decision. Most, admittedly, not quite so directly."

"But all that dough for a down and out bum. Already I've got fifteen hundred, and the next chance more than doubles it."

The demon nodded. "Your next try is for one thousand, six hundred. But the amount is meaningless. The, ah, commodity cannot be evaluated in terms of money. One of our most prized specimens cost but thirty pieces of silver." He added absently, "In that particular case he didn't know it was his soul he was selling."

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Alan Sheriff looked down at the table. There were nine glasses remaining. He said, "For sixteen hundred bucks, eh?"

The demon nodded, his eyes shining.

Sheriff's hand snaked out, took up a glass and brought it half way to his lips. His eyes went to the demon's.

The other smiled.

Alan Sheriff put the glass down quickly, took up another. He held it for a moment. The demon still smiled.

Sheriff's mouth tightened. "*Salud!*" he said, bolting the cocktail. He closed his eyes and waited. When he opened them, the other was extending a sheaf of bills.

Sheriff said, "You'll still be here later in the week?"

"For you I shall always be here, night or day. There are eight glasses left. Your next wager will involve three thousand, two hundred.

Sheriff said flatly, "I gave up two weeks ago. Lots of dough for liquor, good food, gambling, makes the going easier but I'm not changing my mind about calling life quits. I'll be back when I've spent this."

"Very sound judgment," the demon nodded. "Until then."

"So soon?" the demon said. "However, the wager is now three thousand, two hundred."

Sheriff said, "This is the last time."

"Ah?"

"This time I'm using the dough for a new start. I'm getting a job."

"Admirable motive, I understand — from the human viewpoint. However, we shall see." The demon changed the subject. "If I understand correctly the Laws of Chance, this is your crucial test."

"How's that?" Sheriff's eyes came up from the glasses to the other's face.

"When we began, there were thirteen glasses, one of which was poisoned. However, we are nearly half through now and your good luck cannot last forever. Taking the averages, you should miss this time."

Sheriff shook his head. "Each time is a separate time. You don't use up your luck, there is no such thing. The odds aren't as good as they were, but they're still seven to one in my favor."

"Very well, let us see."

Alan Sheriff, sweat on his forehead, reached out slowly for one of the martinis. "*Here's looking at you,*" he said.

The demon answered the door and smiled to see his visitor. "Alan Sheriff! But I thought your last visit was to be just that."

Sheriff's face was tight. "I'm not here for myself, damn you. It's for somebody else."

"Somebody else?" the demon said. "I don't understand."

"A girl," Sheriff snapped. "It's none of your business. You wouldn't

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ever have seen me again except for Muriel. She needs five thousand: medical bills for her old lady, sanitarium. Never mind. The thing is I'll take another one of those drinks."

The demon pinched his lips thoughtfully. "I don't know."

"Damn it, what difference does it make what I want the dough for?"

"Ummm. Your motive for taking the wager disturbs me. Some centuries ago a somewhat similar case precipated a *cause célèbre*. Chap named Johann Faust. Matter had to be taken to the ah, higher authorities. However, let us see what develops. There are seven glasses and your odds are six to one with the prize amounting to exactly six thousand, four hundred dollars."

Sheriff took up a glass at random, toasted defiantly, "*Here's to the ladies!*"

"Very sentimental," the demon nodded.

Sheriff banged on the door heavily, and, before it could be answered, banged again.

The demon opened it, his face quizzical. "Ah, our Alan Sheriff."

Sheriff lurched to the table. The martini glasses stood as before, six of them remaining. They appeared chill and as fresh as the first time he had seen them, months ago.

"What's the bet now?" he slurred.

"The wager is twelve thousand eight hundred against your life and soul." The demon's voice was soft.

"OK. *Here's how.*"

"Beat you again," Sheriff sneered. "Give me the dough. I'm on my way to show up a wise guy. Show him what a real spender can do for a girl." The alcohol was heavy on his breath. "What'd be a classy present for Muriel? Show her what a real guy does for a dame . . ."

The demon ran a thoughtful thumbnail along his trimmed mustache. "I understand mink is highly thought of," he murmured.

"Ah," the demon said. "Here we are, once again."

Sheriff looked about the room, unchanged from the last time he had been here except there were but five glasses on the small table. He wondered vaguely what had happened to the eight glasses he had emptied in turn.

"You know," he said, "each time I come here I have to be convinced all over again that it's true."

"Indeed? As I recall, on your last visit you were in the midst of a somewhat feverish romantic situation. Did you take my advice as to the desirability of mink?"

Sheriff was gazing in fascination at the glasses. He said, "What? Oh. Yeah. This here wise guy boy friend of hers, old high school sweetheart kind of crap, was trying to beat my time." He chuckled thickly. "But I gave her the old rush job, wound up in Miami Beach for a week. Quite a town."

"Isn't it though? And where is Muriel these days?"

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Sheriff was tired of the subject. "She's around somewhere. Got on my nerves finally. What's the bet now? I'm thinking of going into the restaurant business — with my kid brother, he needs the dough to get started."

"Twenty-five thousand, six hundred," the demon said briefly.

"Well, *here's mud in your eye*," Sheriff said.

"Fifty-one thousand, two hundred," the demon said. "The new business doesn't seem to prosper?"

"The kid doesn't realize there's angles to every business. He's too slow for me. We need this dough to put in a bar and maybe a few tables and some slots in the back, maybe some rooms upstairs where a guy can take a dame or maybe throw a little reefer party."

"There are now four glasses," the demon said.

"*Skoal!*"

The demon opened the door at the knock and admitted the burly, heavy-faced man. "It's been a long time," he said simply.

"Yeah," Sheriff said. He looked about the small room. "But you haven't changed much. Neither has this room. I wasn't sure it'd still be here."

"Some things are changeless," the demon said.

"Three glasses left, eh? My luck's really been with me so far. What's the bet now?"

"You could win one hundred and two thousand, four hundred dollars, my friend."

"Two chances out of three. It's still a good percentage and I'm branching out into new territory and need the dough." He stared down at the identical glasses, still retaining their appearance of chill freshness.

"And how is your brother these days?"

"Bill? The hell with him. I had to bounce him out. Too square for the business I'm in. You know," he bragged, "I'm a pretty big shot in some of the rackets these days."

"Ah? I see."

Sheriff took up one of the glasses, looked over its edge at his opponent. "Well, *first one today with this hand*," he muttered, downing it. He waited for a moment then took up the money, stuffed it into his overcoat pocket and left without a backward glance.

The knock at the door was hurried, anxious.

The demon opened it and said, "Yes?"

Sheriff hastened in, looked about quickly. "I'm safe here?"

The demon chuckled. "Really, Alan Sheriff!"

"They're after me. The cops . . ."

"Ah?"

Sheriff's eyes went to the small table. "Two glasses left," he muttered. "I could hire Liber for a lawyer, grease a few palms. With more

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than two hundred grand I could beat this rap, or, for that matter, I could go on down to Mexico, live there the rest of my life."

"It's been done," the demon agreed.

"Fifty-fifty chance," Sheriff hissed in sudden decision. He lifted one of the glasses from the table, said "*Cheers*," downed it and stood back to wait, his face empty and white. Nothing happened.

He turned to the other. "Give me the money," he said triumphantly. "You know what, sucker? It's like you once said. It's never too late to change. I beat you all the way down the line, but I know when I've pushed my luck as far as it'll go. After I've got myself out of this jam, I'm going to straighten up."

"I doubt it," the demon murmured.

"Yes I am, buster. You've lost this boy."

The demon said, "I suggest you drink the other martini."

The other stared at him. "That's the one with the poison. I'm not crazy."

The demon shook his head gently. "I suggest you take the thirteenth glass, Alan Sheriff. It might help you somewhat in the tribulations that lie ahead. After all, it *is* the very best of gin and vermouth available."

Sheriff chuckled his contempt. "Give me my dough, sucker. I'm getting out."

The demon said, "What gave you the impression that the poison was a quick-acting one, Alan Sheriff?"

Sheriff blinked at him. "Huh?"

"I don't remember informing you that death was to be instantaneous following your choice of the wrong glass."

"I . . . I don't get it . . ."

"But of course you got it," the demon said smoothly. "The poison was odorless and tasteless and you got it on your eighth try. Since then your life and soul have been mine to collect at will. The fact that I haven't done so sooner was my own whim — and excellent business, as it developed. Surely in the past few years you have done more for the, ah, *cause* I serve than you would have had I collected my wager immediately."

After a long moment Sheriff picked up the last glass. "Maybe you're right. I might be needing this, and they *are* very good martinis. . . .

"*One for the road*," he toasted with attempted bravado.

"*Down the hatch*," the demon corrected.

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Since Mick McComas retired from science fiction editing, he has been engaged in a number of varied and often unexpected free-lance enterprises; and it was in the course of one of these that he happened upon the information here set forth — a little-realized but valuable clue as to the precise extent to which the peacetime atomic revolution may already be upon us.

Insuring a Revolution

by J. FRANCIS McCOMAS

"THE YEAR 1965 LOOKS LIKE 'THE earliest time at which widely competitive atomic power generation is likely to begin in the United States,' the Joint Senate-House Atomic Energy Committee was told. . . ."

So began a January 31 Associated Press and New York *Times* dispatch which most of you probably read.

The story covered, you'll remember, a report of a non-partisan panel of nine non-government experts who had just finished a ten-months study of the present and future impact of atomic energy on such phases of the national economy as transportation, power, and agriculture.

Now, what you very likely did *not* read was any of three news releases, issued by the insurance industry, that make that 1965 estimate wildly conservative. These three bulletins, released in mid-January, marked the *immediate* integration of atomics into the American economy, for they stated that the American insurance industry had decided that atomic-powered plants are insurable.

So what? you ask.

For your answer, reflect on this: No industrial establishment of any kind whatsoever dares operate for a single minute without complete insurance coverage . . . coverage against any kind of damage to the establishment itself, its equipment, its personnel; and against damage the plant or its employees or its machinery may cause to some property or person *not* connected with the plant.

No insurance company, or group of companies, will insure a risk unless that risk has been precisely calculated to be reasonable. For example, 98 per cent of the nation's casualty and surety companies argue, with justification, that they can't afford to write flood insurance. The

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damage potential is too great, and too concentrated in area, to allow for a profitable operation.

In January, however, these same casualty, surety and fire companies announced that they *could* insure against atomic energy hazards and that they had formed three giant syndicates for that purpose.

The obvious question then is: if this development is of such vital significance to you and your world, why didn't you hear about it?

The answer to that is one of the most curious phenomena of our times: the seeming inability of American business and its so-called publicity departments to communicate information. I am, of course, differentiating between straightforward *information*, of genuine worth and interest to the public, and the professionally conceived and executed sales message.

As an example, I give herewith, in its entirety, the publicity release from the National Board of Fire Underwriters which was presumably intended to inform the public that the NBFU had formed a syndicate of companies to provide property damage insurance for industrial plants using nuclear reactors.

PROPERTY INSURANCE NUCLEAR SYNDICATE BEING FORMED

New York — The National Board of Fire Underwriters yesterday [January 12] released the following statement:

"In response to a letter of invitation addressed to Capital Stock Property Insurance Companies early in December, tentative commitments to date assure the success of the undertaking whereby property insurance companies will be in a position to underwrite risks providing physical property damage insurance for private nuclear energy reactor installations.

Although no final figure has been determined upon, the returns indicate commitments will produce a capacity of not less than $50,000,000 for the capital stock property insurance business.

When the Federal Congress passed the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, applying to the peacetime use of atomic energy, it soon became apparent to the Atomic Energy Commission that the question of insurance coverage for private industry engaged in this program — both physical property damage and third party property damage and liability — must be resolved so that productive capital could be encouraged to invest substantial sums in further nuclear research, experimentation and development.

After due deliberation of the peculiar problems affecting the Property Insurers and consultation with the Executive Committee of the Factory Insurance Association, it was tentatively concluded that the combined available underwriting facilities of the Capital Stock Property Insurance Companies

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could best be mobilized through the National Board of Fire Underwriters to the end that peacetime atomic energy exposures faced by private industry engaged in the atomic energy program may be covered by private insurance."

Believe it or not, that verbiage was aimed at you and was sent to you "through channels." Those channels were the financial editors of general newspapers and newsmagazines, editors of general business publications and of the insurance industry's trade journals. Largely, only these latter published it — along with the needed interpretive comment.

Obviously, few general newsmen have the time to shape this quaint prose into a news story that you, the general reader, could or would want to understand.

Aided by the amiable editor of an insurance trade journal, I feel reasonably competent to translate this Twentieth Century hieratic into the lamented H. L. Mencken's American language.

Here goes: After the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 was passed, the AEC asked industry to start converting to atomic power. Industry refused to budge without the proper insurance. Thereupon the AEC appointed an insurance group (in March, 1955) to determine if the hazards involved in the industrial use of atomic energy are insurable.

The study group, which was permitted to observe the operations of the AEC's installations, has reported that the catastrophe potential of atomic-powered plants is insurable.

Therefore, the National Board of Fire Underwriters, a research and engineering body set up some 90 years ago by the capital stock fire companies to furnish them with needed data on fire risks, fire prevention, safety codes, and the like, has headed up a syndicate of capital stock fire insurance companies to write insurance on the risks of damage to a plant arising from that plant's use of a nuclear reactor.

As of right now, the participating companies have tossed 50 million bucks into the kitty. But that's purely an arbitrary figure, named to get the game going. Actually, the sky's the limit. Private industry's atomic-generated risks can and will be covered by private insurance.

It's as simple as that, readers, and I submit it should have been headlined in your daily newspaper.

The NBFU communiqué was not the only one. That weekend in January saw the notices of the births of two other insurance syndicates, formed to cope with radiation hazards. These notices met the journalistic fate of the NBFU release and for exactly the same reasons. All three publicity (*sic*) releases constitute a trio of perfect examples of how information we'd be clamoring for can be publicly available, and remain completely unknown to us.

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On January 13 the Association of Casualty and Surety Companies announced that another syndicate of some 70 capital stock casualty companies had been formed to "insure the construction, installation, operation and maintenance of nuclear reactors used for industrial, commercial, research and experimental purposes . . . for third party bodily injury and property damage liability against loss or damage due to radiation."

To get at the positively revolutionary development hidden behind that cloud of verbal smog, let's take an oil refinery as an analogy. Suppose one day something — any one of a thousand possibles — goes wrong and that refinery blows skyhigh, taking the neighborhood with it. Adjacent homes, stores, offices, factories are demolished, a hundred or so passers-by are blown to bits, a hundred more are gravely injured.

The total of the ensuing damage suits would be staggering . . . if it were not for that "third party bodily injury and property damage" insurance.

Over the years *all* types of industrial and commercial operations have been so carefully studied by fire-casualty insurance experts that any pay-off, in any amount, for any kind of damage can be forecast with uncanny accuracy.

Now, after the refinery explodes, salvage crews clear away the debris and owners of the ruined properties start building all over again, financed by their paid-up claims. The injured are treated according to the easily diagnosed nature of their injuries.

Question: Can this be done if an atomic reactor blows, spewing radiation all over the place? Can another plant be raised again on the same site, or even in the same neighborhood, in time to cut production losses . . . or ever? Will doctors be able to diagnose — let alone repair — the injuries of *human* casualties?

Will some malformed grandson of a blasted passerby one day sue the owner of the reactor for an awesome number of dollars, claiming his injuries are due to the effect of radiation on his grandparent . . . thereby upsetting all our present concepts of statutes of limitations and instituting an entirely new system of legal theory?

These are the risks that caused industry to tell the AEC it would have no part of atomic power until they were insurable.

I have reported the formation of two syndicates, one to cover plant damage from radiation, one to cover third party damage from radiation.

However, that's by no means the whole picture. The insurance business is highly complex and fiercely competitive. In addition to the capital stock company, owned by its *stockholders*, there is the mutual company, owned by its *policyholders*.

On January 16, Joseph P. Gibson, Jr., president of the American Mutual Reinsurance Company, announced in Chicago that the mutual

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insurance companies had gone the whole hog, so to speak, and formed a syndicate of 91 companies to cover *all* hazards implicit in atomic power operations.

Mr. Gibson, whose company will manage the pool, said that $10,000,000 of protection had been set up as the amount of protection now available to each individual operator of a nuclear reactor, but he stressed that "the capacity of $10,000,000 is simply a minimum goal, and there remain many large mutual insurance companies which are awaiting submission of the question of participation [in the mutual syndicate] to the directors' meetings of their organizations to be held shortly."

(Since most board meetings of the new year are held in March at the latest, many more mutual companies will probably have joined the syndicate by the time you read this.)

Acknowledging the existence of the NBFU and ACSC syndicates, Mr. Gibson realistically remarked that "on very large risks the amount of insurance protection required will be so large that all three pools will cooperate when necessary."

In this reader's opinion, the mutuals' announcement came the closest of the three to straightforward communication. It states that all three pools will charge the same premiums and that these will be based upon analysis of such factors as "size of reactor, type of fuel, type of coolant and moderator, safety of basic design, adequacy of instrument control, efficiency of containment, location with respect to persons and property, and experience with the particular type of reactor."

I should point out the syndicate idea itself is neither new nor revolutionary. Just as a group of construction companies, for example, will band together to tackle a dam or bridge that's just too big for a single company, so will insurance companies band together to handle a body of risks that a single corporation simply could not finance. The Federal government's multi-billion dollar program of insurance for its employees is handled by such a syndicate of companies.

Nor should any overly imaginative reader deduce that a syndicate is a cartel. In the first place, the operations of a syndicate of insurance companies are subject to the same supervision by the Federal Trade Commission and state commissioners of insurance as are the operations of a single company. Moreover, there will be powerful competition within the syndicates themselves. The Association of Casualty and Surety Companies stated in its announcement of syndication that "all forms of liability risks other than radiation will continue to be insured by the individual companies and will not be insured by the syndicate."

Of course, these three syndicates talk, with characteristic vagueness, about the future. If — God forbid! — insurance actuaries had to stand

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up and be counted, very few of them would even endorse that date of 1965 mentioned at the start of this paper. They prefer to *publicly* meditate on a far-off "time when industry has real need of such protection" against atomic risks.

Privately, you may be sure that — although they've probably never heard of it — insurance executives are well aware of the workings of Deming's Law (as often cited by the editor of this magazine). By the very nature of their experience they are guided by the second clause of that law which states, roughly, "that it is impossible to extrapolate fast and far enough to keep up with factual progress."

Note that, on January 31, the Nuclear Development Corporation of America announced that it had been awarded a contract by the Department of the Army to determine the feasibility of applying nuclear power to Transporation Corps equipment used in land or water operations.

The second industrial revolution is here. The first was plotted in James Watt's kitchen. The second has just been successfully organized in the executive suites of the American insurance industry.

The first gun against the past should be fired any day now . . . if the government permits.

There was another AP despatch, also dated January 31, that is disquieting, to put it mildly. That nine-man panel, sober citizens with no political ax to grind, is quoted as saying, "Government secrecy practices are hampering the development of atomic energy for peaceful purposes."

Their report said that the AEC has made some progress under the 1954 act toward releasing from the secret list such non-military data as industry needs for atomic power development.

But they challengingly added that "more harm than good can be done by releasing 'old' information when more up-to-date information remains classified."

You can't have a revolution without a foe. Who are we warring against?

ONCE AGAIN

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Idris Seabright is, as you know, often gentle and even tender in her imaginings: but she can also be, when the occasion demands it, uncompromisingly cruel — as in this brief tale of crime and unexpected punishment.

White Goddess

by IDRIS SEABRIGHT

"I DON'T FOR AN INSTANT SUPPOSE you really want my wretched teaspoons," Miss Smith said sharply.

Sharply, yes, but her voice held the rich, throaty, fruity tremulousness of a BBC actress playing an old woman, a young BBC actress; and Carson perceived, alongside of his indignation at being cheated out of his small booty — she must have eyes in the back of her head — the hope that she really was a young woman who for some personally cogent reason had elected to dress and act like a woman advanced in age. It was somehow less nerve-racking to think of her as a young woman in disguise than as an old woman who moved and spoke like somebody in her twenties.

Whoever she was, she was certainly not the gentle, woolly-headed, lovable victim he had intended. Mauve shoulderette and blue-veined hands to the contrary. He had met her on the boardwalk, which had always been one of his best hunting grounds for nice old ladies. He hadn't had to fish any more than usual for the invitation to tea. Now he saw that she was neither old nor a lady. And the name she had adopted was an insult. Miss Mary Smith — anonymity could go no further.

"What are you smirking about?" she demanded. "I want my spoons."

Silently he reached in his overcoat pocket and pulled out five teaspoons. She was right, he didn't need the money. He almost never could sell any of the things he took from people her age, and when he did the money was paid into a separate account and was never touched. It was a neurosis, less creditable than moral masochism, better than a lot of things he could think of. He enjoyed it a little too much to want to be rid of it.

He put the spoons down on the tea table in front of her, and sank back into his chair. She counted. Her foot — bunionless, but in a wide black oxford — began to tap. "That's only five. There were six. I mean to have the other one."

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Reluctantly he gave her the last spoon. It was the best of the six, sterling and old, but so meager in all its proportions that it would never be worth much more than it had been at the time it was made. The bowl was full of fine, small dents, as if some infant, contemporary with Washington and Jefferson, had teethed on it. Wretched infant — the sharp, penurious edges must have finely lacerated his gums.

She snatched the spoon up and gave it a fierce rub on the folds of the teacloth. She handed it back to him. "Look in the bowl."

Carson did as he was bidden. Miss . . . Smith obviously wasn't going to call the police, and while he was uncomfortable he wasn't exactly afraid. "Well?" he said, putting the spoon down on the table again.

"Didn't you see anything?"

"Only myself, upside-down. The usual thing."

"Is that all!" She sounded jarred. "Give me back my watercolor, while I'm thinking. It's worth even less than the spoons."

She *couldn't* have seen him pick up the watercolor. She had been making the tea, with her back to him, and there were no mirrors or shiny surfaces. She couldn't even have noticed the gap the watercolor had left, for it had been sitting behind three or four other tasteless pieces of bric-a-brac.

"We might as well have some tea," she said, pulling the restored watercolor over to her side of the table. Even framed, the picture was no bigger than a European postcard. It showed a palm tree, an island, water, all very runny and imitation-Winslow-Homery. No wonder Carson had thought it would be a good thing to steal. "Should you like a little gin in your tea? I find it helps."

"Yes, please."

She poured from the square bottle into the teapot and left the bottle sitting on the table. They drank. The tea was scalding hot, and Carson could only make its burden of spirits tolerable by loading his cup with sugar.

Miss Smith put her own cup down in the saucer. She coughed and then blew her nose into a man's cotton handkerchief. "You'd better get in," she said, tapping the surface of the watercolor with her middle finger, "and see how it fits."

Whooosh, whosh, thud. Carson was inside the watercolor, sitting on the island with the Winslow-Homery palms.

The grass was infernally stickery and the place was as noisy as pandemonium. The waves, blocks of granular blue frozen custard, landed against the beach with the rocky crash of pottery plates, the sea gulls skirled like bagpipes, the serrated palm fronds gave out the cry of sheets of tin.

Yet Carson was not too distracted to perceive that in the Smithian sense of the word the island did fit

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him rather well. The noise was an insulation; he didn't care whether any old lady's mantelpiece anywhere held bric-a-brac the right size to go into his pocket. He was as muzzy and comfortable as if Miss Smith had cuddled him up nicely in folds of her woolly shoulderette.

Heigh-ho. Must be the gin. He slept.

When he woke up everything was still going on. Gulls, waves and palms contributed their respective noises. Out beyond where the rigid blue freezer-product waves were forming there was a dark blue turbulence in the water. Had it been there before? Must have. He wasn't sure.

Could be caused by lots of things — a surfaced shark, a giant turtle, a Vernean octopus. Could be. Wasn't. *Wasn't.* Carson gave a feeble, frightened yip.

Pop. He was sitting opposite Miss Smith at the tea table again. She had put a cozy over the teapot, but it seemed to be still the same pot of tea.

She buttered a crumpet and put the whole thing in her mouth. "Did you like it on the island?" she asked, chewing.

"It was all right at first," he replied unwillingly. "Later there was something swimming around under the water I didn't like."

"Interesting." She grinned. "You didn't mind the noise, you didn't mind the isolation. It was something swimming around under the water you couldn't see that you . . . didn't like."

What was she up to? Was she trying to perform some sort of divine lay analysis on him? Trying, in approved psychiatric fashion, to find out what he was afraid of so she could rid him of the fear? Nah. More likely, she was mapping out the contours of his fear so she could embed him, fixate him, in it.

"Why are you so interested?" he asked. He tried to butter himself a crumpet, but his hands shook so he had to lay down the knife.

"It isn't often people try to steal things from me."

No. They wouldn't. It took Carson, with all the old ladies in the world to choose from, to get tangled up with somebody who was Isis, Rhea, Cybele — there were lots and lots of divine identities to pick from — Anatha, Dindymene, Astarte. Or Neith.

Carson licked his lips. "How about a little more tea?" he suggested. "And a little more gin in it? It makes a refreshing drink."

"There's plenty of gin in it already."

None the less, she did not protest when he took off the cozy and picked up the square bottle. She didn't seem to be looking. He'd been fooled that way before, and she probably was watching. Yet it might be possible to get even a goddess drunk.

He set the bottle down with the label toward her, so she couldn't see

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how much was gone. "You pour."

Did the hand that held the teapot over his cup waver? He couldn't be sure. "Goodness, but you've made it strong," she said.

"Refreshing!" He managed a smile. "Do have a crumpet. Vitality is low, this time in the afternoon."

"Yes." She was shaken by a spell of coughing. A crumb seemed to have caught in her windpipe. He hoped she would choke to death.

She washed the crumpet down with the last of her cup of tea. "And now I'll have my paperweight."

It was the last of his booty. He had liked it the best of anything. Sadly he took the globe from his pocket and gave it to her.

She tapped it. Flakes of mimic snow floated up to the zenith of the sphere and then began to settle down on the snow scene at the bottom again.

"Pretty," she said admiringly. "Pretty snow."

"Yes. I admired it."

". . . getting late to try you on anything more. B'sides, I know pretty well what you're like. *You*'re the kind can't stand waiting for anything unpleasant." She upended the teapot over her cup.

Her voice was getting fuzzy. She had spilled a trail of drops over the tea cloth before she set the teapot down. Now was the moment, if there was to be a moment.

"Thank you for a pleasant afternoon," he said, pushing back his chair and rising. "Perhaps we can repeat the occasion at a later date."

Her mouth opened. A film of saliva glinted iridescently between her parted lips and then broke. "What rot. In with you, you stupid fool."

The paperweight received him. It was a little like pushing against a stiff wind, a little like swimming, but he could breathe well enough. He worked his way through the fluid — glycerine? — to the glass wall and peered out.

Miss Smith was snapping her fingers. Her lips moved. She started to get up. She collapsed on the floor. The teacup fell from her limp fingers and settled down beside her cozily.

Miss Smith had drunk herself out. As the moments passed, he began to wonder. He would have expected her to twitch. At last it was borne in on him that she wasn't out. She was dead.

About 8 o'clock somebody came in and found her. There was a lot of rushing to and fro before the men with the stretcher came. The teacup stayed on the floor.

They hadn't thought to draw the blinds, either. Moonlight shone in on his glass prison and lit up the snow at the bottom brilliantly. If only it were real snow! He thought longingly of the exquisite little hole he could have scooped for himself in a snowdrift, the warm Steffanson-style slumber he could have enjoyed in his fluffy burrow. As it was, he floated vertically all night, aching

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with insomnia, as comfortless as an asparagus stalk in a sauce pan.

Day came at last. He didn't know whether he regretted Miss Smith's death or not. Did an irrational belief in her *potential* benevolence still linger in him? After the island and this?

The morning was well advanced when a cleaning woman came in. She was young, her mouth was red, she had flamboyant yellow hair.

She plugged in the vacuum and went over the floor. Tardily she undressed the tea table and washed the tea things. She picked up his paperweight.

She shook it roughly. Snow began to fall around him. She pressed her nose up against the glass in a prodigy of short-focus accommodation. Her eyes were enormous. It seemed impossible that she should not see him.

She grinned. He recognized her. Miss Smith.

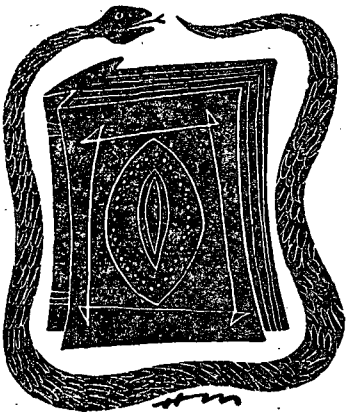
He might have known that Neith wouldn't stay dead.

She shook the glass once more. She set it down sharply on the mantel.

For a moment he had thought she was going to throw it against the tiles of the fireplace. But that would come later.

She might let him live on for days. She could set the globe in the sun, freeze it in the frig, buffet it back and forth until he got as seasick as a resented fetus . . . the possibilities were many. In the end there would be the crash.

She drew her finger across her throat playfully. She unplugged the vacuum and went out.



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Most science fiction writers begin incredibly early in life; but Robert F. Young is an almost unique exception. He did not start writing till he was 33, nor succeed in selling until he was 37. Since then he has rapidly sold over two dozen stories to all the leading magazines in the field; and his self-description is a valuable lesson to novices. "I suspect," he writes, "that I was afflicted with the attitude which most would-be writers take toward writing: 'I'd write if I could only find the time.' It took me longer than it does the majority of writers to discover the essential truth that the only way to 'find' time is to take it." I hope he'll continue to take time for many stories as charming and skilful as this tale of a spinster's gallant rescue of poetry in a glitteringly prosaic future.

Emily and the Bards Sublime

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

EMILY MADE THE ROUNDS OF HER charges every weekday morning as soon as she arrived at the museum. Officially, she was assistant curator, in charge of the Hall of Poets. In her own mind, however, she was far more than a mere assistant curator: she was a privileged mortal, thrown into happy propinquity to the greatest of the Immortals — *the bards sublime*, in the words of one of their number, *whose distant footsteps echo through the corridors of Time.*

The poets were arranged alphabetically rather than chronologically, and Emily would begin with the pedestals on the left of the hall — the A's — and make her way around the imposing semi-circle. That way she was always able to save Alfred, Lord Tennyson till the last, or very nearly the last. Lord Alfred was her favorite.

She had a pleasant good morning for each of the poets, and each of them responded characteristically; but for Lord Alfred she had a pleasant phrase or two as well, such as, "Isn't it a beautiful day for writing?" or "I do hope the *Idyls* don't give you any more trouble!" Of course she knew that Alfred wasn't really going to do any writing, that the old-fashioned pen and the ream of period paper on the little escritoire beside his chair were there just for show, and that anyway his android talents did not go

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beyond reciting the poetry which his flesh-and-blood prototype had written centuries ago; but just the same, it did no harm to pretend, especially when his Tennyson tapes responded with something like, "*In the Spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish'd dove; in the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love*—" or, "*Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls, come hither, the dances are done, in gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls, Queen lily and rose in one*—"

When Emily had first taken over the Hall of Poets she had had great expectations. She, like the museum directors who had conceived of the idea, had devoutly believed that poetry was *not* dead, and that once the people found out that they could listen to the magic words rather than having to read them in dusty books, and, moreover, listen to them falling from the lips of an animated life-size model of their creator, neither hell nor high taxes would be able to keep the people away. In this, both she and the museum directors had been out of tune.

The average Twenty-First Century citizen remained as immune to Browning-brought-to-life as he had to Browning-preserved-in-books. And as for the dwindling literati, *they* preferred *their* poetic dishes served the old-fashioned way, and in several instances stated publicly that investing animated dummies with the immortal phrases of the Grand Old Masters was a technological crime against the humanities.

But in spite of the empty years, Emily remained faithfully at her desk, and up until the morning when the poetic sky collapsed, she still believed that someday, someone would take the right-hand corridor out of the frescoed foyer (instead of the left which led to the Hall of Automobiles, or the one in the middle which led to the Hall of Electrical Appliances) and walk up to her desk and say, "Is Leigh Hunt around? I've always wondered *why* Jenny kissed him and I thought maybe he'd tell me if I asked," or "Is Bill Shakespeare busy right now? I'd like to discuss the melancholy Dane with him." But the years flew by and the only people who ever took the right-hand corridor besides Emily herself were the museum officials, the janitor, and the night watchman. Consequently, she came to know the bards sublime very well, and to sympathize with them in their ostracism. In a way she was in the same boat they were. . . .

On the morning when the poetic sky collapsed, Emily made her rounds as usual, unaware of the imminent calamity. Robert Browning had his customary "*Morning's at seven; the hill-side's dew-pearl'd*" in answer to her greeting, and William Cowper said briskly: "*The twentieth year is well-nigh past since first our sky was overcast!*" Edward Fitzgerald responded (somewhat tip-

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sily, Emily thought) with his undeviating "*Before the phantom of False morning died, methought a Voice within the Tavern cried, 'When all the Temple is prepared within, why lags the drowsy Worshipper outside?'*" Emily walked past his pedestal rather brusquely. She'd never seen eye to eye with the museum directors with regard to the inclusion of Edward Fitzgerald in the Hall of Poets. In her mind he had no real claim to immortality. True, he had infiltrated his five translations of Omar with an abundance of original imagery, but that didn't make him a genuine poet. Not in the sense that Milton and Byron were poets. Not in the sense that Tennyson was a poet.

Emily's step quickened at the thought of Lord Alfred, and two undernourished roses bloomed briefly on her thin cheeks. She could hardly wait till she reached his pedestal and heard what he had to say. Unlike the tapes of so many of the other poets, his tapes always came up with something different — possibly because he was one of the newer models, though Emily disliked thinking of her charges as models.

She came at last to the treasured territory and looked up into the youthful face (all of the androids were patterned after the poets as they had looked in their twenties). "Good morning, Lord Alfred," she said.

The sensitive synthetic lips formed a life-like smile. The tapes whirred soundlessly. The lips parted, and soft words emerged:

"For a breeze of morning moves,
And the planet of Love is on high,
Beginning to faint in the light that she loves
On a bed of daffodil sky —"

Emily raised one hand to her breast, the words gamboling in the lonely woodland of her mind. She was so enchanted that she couldn't think of any of her usual pleasantries on the exigencies of writing poetry and she stood there silently instead, staring at the figure on the pedestal with a feeling akin to awe. Presently she moved on, murmuring abstracted good mornings to Whitman, Wilde, Wordsworth, Yeats —

She was surprised to see Mr. Brandon, the curator, waiting at her desk. Mr. Brandon rarely visited the Hall of Poets; he concerned himself almost exclusively with the technological displays and left the management of the bards to his assistant. He was carrying a large book, Emily noticed, and that was another source of surprise: Mr. Brandon wasn't much of a reader.

"Good morning, Miss Meredith," he said. "I have some good news for you."

Immediately Emily thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley. The present model had a tape deficiency and she had mentioned the matter to Mr. Brandon several times, suggesting

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that he write Androids, Inc. and demand a replacement. Perhaps he had finally done so, perhaps he had received an answer — "Yes, Mr. Brandon?" she said eagerly.

"As you know, Miss Meredith, the Hall of Poets has been somewhat of a letdown to all of us. In my own opinion it was an impractical idea in the first place, but being a mere curator I had nothing to say in the matter. The Board of Directors wanted a roomful of verse-happy androids, so we ended up with a roomful of verse-happy androids. Now, I am happy to say, the members of the board have finally come to their senses. Even they have finally realized that poets, as far as the public is concerned, are dead and that the Hall of Poets —"

"Oh, but I'm sure the public's interest will be awakened soon," Emily interrupted, trying to shore up the trembling sky.

"The Hall of Poets," Mr. Brandon repeated relentlessly, "is a constant and totally unnecessary drain on the museum's financial resources, and is preempting space desperately needed by our expanding display in the Hall of Automobiles. I'm even happier to say that the Board has finally come to a decision: starting tomorrow morning the Hall of Poets will be discontinued to make room for the Chrome Age period of the Automobile display. It's by far the most important period and —"

"But the poets," Emily interrupted again. "What about the poets?" The sky was falling all around her now, and intermingled with the shards of blue were the tattered fragments of noble words and the debris of once proud phrases.

"Why we'll put them in storage of course." Mr. Brandon's lips gave brief tenure to a sympathetic smile. "Then, if the public's interest ever is awakened, all we'll need to do is uncrate them and —"

"But they'll smother! They'll die!"

Mr. Brandon looked at her sternly. "Don't you think you're being a little bit ridiculous, Miss Meredith? How can an android smother? How can an android die?"

Emily knew her face had reddened, but she held her ground. "Their words will be smothered if they can't speak them. Their poetry will die if nobody listens to it."

Mr. Brandon was annoyed. There was a touch of pinkness in his sallow cheeks and his brown eyes had grown dark. "You're being very unrealistic about this, Miss Meredith. I'm very disappointed in you. I thought you'd be delighted to know that you're going to be in charge of a progressive display for a change, instead of a mausoleum filled with dead poets."

"You mean I'm going to be in charge of the Chrome Age period?"

Mr. Brandon mistook her apprehension for awe. Instantly his voice grew warm. "Why of course," he said. "You didn't think I'd let someone else take over your domain,

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did you?" He gave a little shudder, as though the very thought of such a consideration were repugnant. In a sense it was: someone else would demand more money. "You can take over your new duties first thing tomorrow, Miss Meredith. We've engaged a moving crew to transfer the cars tonight, and a gang of decorators will be here in the morning to bring the hall up to date. With luck, we'll have everything ready for the public by the day after tomorrow. . . . Are you familiar with the Chrome Age, Miss Meredith?"

"No," Emily said numbly, "I'm not."

"I thought you might not be, so I brought you this." Mr. Brandon handed her the big book he was carrying. "*An Analysis of the Chrome Motif in Twentieth Century Art.* Read it religiously, Miss Meredith. It's the most important book of our century."

The last of the sky had fallen and Emily stood helplessly in the blue rubble. Presently she realized that the heavy object in her hands was *An Analysis of the Chrome Motif in Twentieth Century Art*, and that Mr. Brandon had gone. . . .

Somehow she got through the rest of the day, and, that night, just before she left, she said farewell to the poets. She was crying when she slipped through the electronic door into the September street and she cried all the way home in the aircab. Her apartment seemed cramped and ugly, the way it had seemed years ago, before the bards sublime had come into her life; and the screen of her video set stared out of the shadows at her like the pale and pitiless eye of a deep sea monster.

She ate a tasteless supper and went to bed early. She lay in the empty darkness looking through her window at the big sign across the street. The big sign kept winking on and off, imparting a double message. On the first wink it said: TAKE SOMI-TABLETS. On the second: ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ. She lay there sleepless for a long while. Part of the time she was the Lady of Shalott, robed in snowy white, floating down the river to Camelot, and the rest of the time she was holding her breath again beneath the surface of the swimming hole, desperately hoping that the neighborhood boys, who had caught her swimming bare, would tire of their cruel laughter and their obscene words and go away so that she could crawl out of the cold water and get her clothes. Finally, after she had buried her flaming face for the sixth time, they did go away, and she stumbled, blue and trembling, up the bank, and struggled furiously into the sanctuary of her dacron dress. And then she was running, wildly running, back to the village, and yet, strangely, she wasn't running at all, she was floating instead, lying in the boat and robed in snowy white, floating down the river to

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Camelot. *A gleaming shape she floated by, dead-pale between the houses high, silent into Camelot.* And the knights and the people came out upon the wharf, the way they always did, and read her name upon the prow, and presently Lancelot appeared — Lancelot or Alfred, for sometimes he was one and sometimes he was the other and lately he had come to be both. "*She has a lovely face,*" Lancelot-Alfred said, and Emily of Shalott heard him clearly even though she was supposed to be dead: "*God in His mercy lend her grace, the lady of Shalott. . . .*"

The moving crew had worked all night and the Hall of Poets was unrecognizable. The poets were gone, and in their places stood glittering representations of twentieth century art. There was something called a "Firedome 8" where Robert Browning had sat dreaming of E.B.B., and a long low sleek object with the improbable name of "Thunderbird" preempted the space that Alfred, Lord Tennyson had made sacred.

Mr. Brandon approached her, his eyes no less bright than the chrome décor he had come to love. "Well, Miss Meredith, what do you think of your new display?"

Emily almost told him. But she held her bitterness back. Getting fired would only estrange her from the poets completely, while, if she continued to work in the museum, she would at least have the assurance that they were near. "It's — it's dazzling," she said.

"You think it's dazzling now, just wait till the interior decorators get through!" Mr. Brandon could barely contain his enthusiasm. "Why, I almost envy you, Miss Meredith. You'll have the most attractive display in the whole museum!"

"Yes, I guess I will," Emily said. She looked bewilderedly around at her new charges. Presently: "Why did they paint them such gaudy colors, Mr. Brandon?" she asked.

The brightness in Mr. Brandon's eyes diminished somewhat. "I see you didn't even open the cover of *An Analysis of the Chrome Motif in Twentieth Century Art,*" he said reprovingly. "Even if you'd as much as glanced at the jacket flap you'd know that color design in the American automobile was an inevitable accompaniment to the increase in chrome accouterments. The two factors combined to bring about a new era in automobile art that endured for more than a century."

"They look like Easter eggs," Emily said. "Did people actually *ride* in them?"

Mr. Brandon's eyes had regained their normal hue and his enthusiasm lay at his feet like a punctured balloon. "Why of course they rode in them! I think you're being deliberately difficult, Miss Meredith, and I don't approve of your attitude at all!" He turned and walked away.

Emily hadn't meant to antagonize

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him and she wanted to call him back and apologize. But for the life of her she couldn't. The transition from Tennyson to the Thunderbird had embittered her more than she had realized.

She put in a bad morning, helplessly watching the decorators as they went about refurbishing the hall. Gradually, pastel walls acquired a brighter hue, and mullioned windows disappeared behind chrome venetian blinds. The indirect lighting system was torn out and blazing fluorescents were suspended from the ceiling; the parqueted floor was mercilessly overlaid with synthetic tile. By noon the hall had taken on some of the aspects of an over-sized lavatory. All that was lacking, Emily thought cynically, was a row of chrome commodes.

She wondered if the poets were comfortable in their crates, and after lunch she ascended the stairs to the attic storeroom to find out. But she found no crated poets in the big dusty loft; she found nothing that had not been there before — the out-outdated relics that had accumulated through the years. A suspicion tugged at the corner of her mind. Hurriedly she descended the stairs to the museum proper and sought out Mr. Brandon. "Where are the poets?" she demanded, when she found him directing the alignment of one of the automobiles.

The guilt on Mr. Brandon's face was as unmistakable as the rust spot on the chrome bumper before which he was standing. "Really, Miss Meredith," he began, "don't you think you're being a little un —"

"Where are they?" Emily repeated.

"We — we put them in the cellar." Mr. Brandon's face was almost as red as the incarnadine fender he had just been sighting along.

"Why?"

"Now Miss Meredith, you're taking the wrong attitude toward this, you're —"

"Why did you put them in the cellar?"

"I'm afraid there was a slight change in our original plans." Mr. Brandon seemed suddenly absorbed in the design in the synthetic tile at his feet. "In view of the fact that public apathy in poetical matters is probably permanent, and in view of the additional fact that the present redecorating project is more of a drain upon our finances than we anticipated, we —"

"You're going to sell them for scrap!" Emily's face was white. Furious tears coalesced in her eyes, ran down her cheeks. "I hate you!" she cried. "I hate you and I hate the directors. You're like crows. If something glitters you pick it up and hoard it away in your old nest of a museum and throw out all the good things to make room for it. I hate you I hate you I hate you!"

"Please, Miss Meredith, try to be realistic —" Mr. Brandon paused

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when he discovered that he was talking to unoccupied air. Emily was a flurry of footsteps and a prim print dress far down the row of cars. Mr. Brandon shrugged. But the shrug was a physical effort, not at all casual. He kept thinking of the time, years ago, when the thin girl with the big haunted eyes and the shy smile had approached him in the Hall of Electrical Appliances and asked him for a job. And he thought of how shrewd he had been — only "shrewd" didn't seem to be the right word now — in making her assistant curator, which was an empty title that no one else wanted because it rated less than janitor's wages, and in foisting the Hall of Poets on her so that he himself could spend his time in pleasanter surroundings. And he remembered the inexplicable change that had come over her in the ensuing years, how the haunted quality had gradually disappeared from her eyes, how her step had quickened, how bright her smile had become, especially in the morning —

Angrily, Mr. Brandon shrugged again. His shoulders felt as though they were made of lead.

The poets were piled in an unsung corner. Afternoon sunlight eked through a high cellar window and lay palely on their immobile faces. Emily sobbed when she saw them.

It was some time before she found and extricated Alfred. She propped him up on a discarded twentieth century chair and sat down facing him in another. He regarded her almost questioningly with his android eyes. " 'Locksley Hall'," she said.

"Comrades, leave me here a little, while as yet 'tis early morn:
Leave me here, and when you want me, sound upon the bugle horn —"

When he had finished reciting "Locksley Hall," Emily said: " 'Morte d'Arthur'," and when "Morte d'Arthur" was over, she said: " 'The Lotus-Eaters.' " And all the while he recited, her mind was divided into two parts. One part was absorbed with the poetry, the other with the dilemma of the poets.

It wasn't until the middle of "Maud" that Emily became aware of the passage of time. With a start she realized that she could no longer see Alfred's face, and glancing up at the window she saw that it was gray with twilight. Alarmed, she got to her feet and made her way to the cellar stairs. She found the light switch in the darkness and climbed the stairs to the first floor, leaving Alfred alone with "Maud." The museum was in darkness, except for a night light burning in the foyer.

Emily paused in the dim aura of the light. Apparently no one had seen her descend into the cellar, and Mr. Brandon, assuming that

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she had gone home, had turned the place over to the night watchman and gone home himself. But where was the night watchman? If she wanted to get out she would have to find him and ask him to open the door. But did she want to get out?

Emily pondered the question. She thought of the poets piled ignominiously in the cellar and she thought of the glittering vehicles usurping the hallowed ground that was rightfully theirs. At the crucial moment her eyes caught the glint of metal coming from a small display beside the door.

It was an ancient firemen's display, showing the fire-fighting equipment in use a century ago. There was a chemical fire extinguisher, a miniature hook and ladder, a coiled canvas hose, an ax . . . It was the light ricocheting from the burnished blade of the ax that had first attracted her attention.

Hardly conscious of what she was doing, she walked over to the display. She picked up the ax, hefted it. She found that she could wield it easily. A mist settled over her mind and her thoughts came to a halt. Carrying the ax, she moved down the corridor that once had led to the Hall of Poets. She found the switch in the darkness and the new fluorescents exploded like elongated novæ, blazed harshly down on twentieth century man's contribution to art.

The cars stood bumper to bumper in a large circle, as though engaged in a motionless race with each other. Just before Emily was a bechromed affair in gray — an older model than its color-bedaubed companions, but good enough for a starter. Emily approached it purposefully, raised the ax, and aimed for the windshield. And then she paused, struck by a sense of wrongness.

She lowered the ax, stepped forward, and peered into the open window. She looked at the imitation leopard skin seat covers, the bedialed dashboard, the driving wheel . . . Suddenly she realized what the wrongness was.

She moved on down the circle. The sense of wrongness grew. The cars varied as to size, color, chrome décor, horsepower, and seating capacity, but in one respect they did not vary at all. Everyone of them was empty.

Without a driver, a car was as dead as a poet in a cellar.

Abruptly Emily's heart began pounding. The ax slipped from her fingers, fell unnoticed to the floor. She hurried back along the corridor to the foyer. She had just opened the door to the cellar when a shout halted her. She recognized the night watchman's voice and waited impatiently till he came close enough to identify her.

"Why, it's Miss Meredith," he said, when he came up to her. "Mr. Brandon didn't say anybody was working overtime tonight."

"Mr. Brandon probably forgot," Emily said, marveling at the ease

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with which the lie slipped from her lips. Then a thought struck her: why stop at one lie? Even with the aid of the freight elevator, her task wasn't going to be easy. Why indeed! "Mr. Brandon said for you to give me a hand if I needed any help," she said. "And I'm afraid I'm going to need lots of help!"

The night watchman frowned. He considered quoting the union clause appropriate to the situation — the one stipulating that a night watchman should never be expected to engage in activities detrimental to the dignity of his occupation, in other words, to work. But there was a quality about Emily's face that he had never noticed before — a cold determined quality not in the least amenable to labor union clauses. He sighed. "All right, Miss Meredith," he said.

"Well, what do you think of them?" Emily asked.

Mr. Brandon's consternation was a phenomenon to behold. His eyes bulged slightly and his jaw had dropped a good quarter of an inch. But he managed a reasonably articulate, "Anachronistic."

"Oh, that's because of the period clothes," Emily said. "We can buy them modern business suits later on, when the budget permits."

Mr. Brandon stole a look into the driver's seat of the aquamarine Buick beside which he was standing. He made an effort to visualize Ben Jonson in twenty-first century pastels. To his surprise he found the effort rewarding. His eyes settled back in place and his vocabulary began to come back.

"Maybe you've got something here at that, Miss Meredith," he said. "And I think the Board will be pleased. We didn't really want to scrap the poets, you know; it's just that we couldn't find a practical use for them. But now —"

Emily's heart soared. After all, in a matter of life and death, practicality was a small price to have to pay. . . .

After Mr. Brandon had gone, she made the rounds of her charges. Robert Browning had his usual "*Morning's at seven; the hill-side's dew-pearl'd*" in response to her greeting, though his voice sounded slightly muffled coming from the interior of his 1958 Packard, and William Cowper said briskly from his new upholstered eminence: "*The twentieth year is well-nigh past since first our sky was overcast!*" Edward Fitzgerald gave the impression that he was hurtling along at breakneck speed in his 1960 Chrysler and Emily frowned severely at his undeviating reference to Khayyám's tavern. She saved Alfred, Lord Tennyson till the last. He looked quite natural behind the wheel of his 1965 Ford, and a casual observer would have assumed that he was so preoccupied with his driving that he saw nothing but the chrome-laden rear-end of the car ahead of him. But Emily knew better. She

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knew that he was really seeing Camelot, and the Island of Shalott, and Lancelot riding with Guinevere over a burgeoning English countryside.

She hated to break into his reverie, but she was sure he wouldn't mind.

"Good morning, Lord Alfred," she said.

The noble head turned and the android eyes met hers. They seemed brighter, for some reason, and his voice, when he spoke, was vibrant and strong:

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfills Himself in many ways. . . ."

Coming Next Month

Remember Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (F&SF, April, 1955), that tenderly humorous and understanding story of the monks who tried to keep knowledge alive during the post-atomic Dark Ages? In our next issue (out around July 1), Miller presents a complete short novel, AND THE LIGHT IS RISEN, telling what happens when civilization is once more ready to receive this treasured learning — a forceful and moving story of the conflict (in which there is no clean-cut right and wrong) between mystic and pragmatic minds. In the same issue, Theodore Sturgeon employs his sharpest scalpel to dissect a profit-making purveyor of flying saucer faddism, in *Fear Is a Business*. There'll be short stories (*all new* — no reprints this time) by Mack Reynolds, Will Stanton and others; and a fascinatingly different article in which that great Irish storyteller, W. B. Ready, looks through strictly Irish eyes at the claims of Bridey Murphy.

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R. V. Cassill has led the dual career of teacher and writer, which is not at all unusual; but most unusual is the further duality of his writing. With one hand, he writes "quality" short stories, winning an Atlantic *"First" award in 1947 and appearing in many literary quarterlies, in* DISCOVERY, NEW DIRECTIONS *and* NEW WORLD WRITING, *and five times in six years in the Foley and O. Henry annuals. With the other, he produces paperback original novels of crime, sex, violence and psychopathology. His work is not quite so schizophrenic as his "quality" editors probably think: his paperbacks, from* DORMITORY WOMEN (*Lion, 1954*) *to* THE WOUND OF LOVE (*Avon, 1956*), *reveal subtle literary values along with their powerful popular impact; and something of the shock-value of his crime novels turns up at times in his "little magazine" stories, as in this nightmare absolute (yet meaningful) from* Perspective.

The Waiting Room

by R. V. CASSILL

IT WAS A WARM AND PROMISING rain that fell on the bus between Washington and the Marengo junction. By now it was eroding the last big snowbanks. It ran black in the ditches and among the soppy grasses of the fence rows that bordered the road. Little Mary Adams sat with her face close to the bus window admiring the way the rain worked outside and still savoring the way she could sit intact within the steel shelter of the bus, the shelter of her pleasant clothes, and the impalpable shelter of going back to college with an engagement ring from Joe Perry.

Ahead of her was a ten minute wait at the Marengo junction, 45 minutes more on a bus to the depot in Iowa City, six minutes in the taxi, one minute on the walk, two minutes on the stairs and then she would come into her own room at the dorm. There she could lie warm through the night while she heard this snow-melting rain at work out past her window. She could sleep with the knowledge that the years of anxiety — her own and in some subtle way the anxiety of her parents — were quieting away behind her, like an ambiguous excitement

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that had simply never let her breathe. She could go to sleep feeling that it was not just Joe Perry she had engaged herself to this weekend, but also had engaged herself to "time to come"; that she was not only going to marry a nice boy who worked in the John Deere office but marry the solid years of the future as well.

Naturally — she knew this in spite of her dreaminess — her anticipated schedule wouldn't work out quite as she hoped now. Naturally she would run into Sarah, or Chris, or Elizabeth in the dormitory hall, or maybe meet someone in the john and she would tell them, naturally. The news would tinkle around the third floor and presently her room would be crowded with friends. She would have to get out her photos of Joe, show the ring around, explain about Joe's job, laugh and spar away some of the comments Elizabeth was sure to make right in front of them all — (Elizabeth's voice throaty and half masculine, "Manly chap, ain't he?" "Mmmmmm." "And those beeeg hands." "Oooo." "Well, I'll bet you're glad you've been a good girl haven't you?" "*Uh huh.*") But after all the gabble there would still come those minutes of falling asleep cuddling the intact assurance which had become clear for her as the bus rumbled on.

"Marengo Junction," the driver called. He half-turned his head to speak, and Mary noticed, as she had not before, that he was an old man, old for a bus driver anyway, she thought, and the style of his mustache was positively ancient, like those pictured in her mother's albums. He had turned on a small light and the windshield wipers flicked behind him like crazy sickles.

She buttoned her coat, took her bag from the overhead rack, and felt the corners of the seat for her purse. At first she could not locate it, and her banished anxiety was suddenly with her again, toppling the structure of her comfort. Her bus ticket and every penny she had were in the purse, though her mother had often warned her not to travel without some kind of reserve fund tucked in her brassiere or in her shoe.

The purse must have slipped to the aisle floor. Someone must have stepped on it there, because her fingers touched mud when she picked it up. She had it open and was checking hastily to see if anything might be broken in it when the bus swung off the pavement and stopped and the driver called again, "Marengo Junction."

"Bad night," he said to her as she stepped down.

"Oh, I think it's nice," she said. "And it's Springy."

The old driver grinned. "Sure," he said. "Only eight or nine months to Christmas, too. Naa, this is no Spring. The waiting room's right in there, lady."

Out of the lone building that was a combination of a filling station and

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other things, a man came shielding his head and shoulders under a raincoat. He began a shouted conversation with the driver while Mary trotted in out of the rain.

The waiting room was a dark green place and hardly lighted at all, though one end opened on short stairs to a sandwich bar, brightly lighted enough, and there were neon signs, MEN and WOMEN, at the other end that flickered a red bloom of light over the nearer benches. Some of the waiters' benches were occupied. Some odds and ends of luggage were stacked on one.

Mary chose a seat next to a woman holding a child, looked indifferently at the people around her, who sat with the kind of resignation that suggested they might have become natives, citizens, of the room — and then began flicking the drops of rain from her coat. They were icy to her touch, but as they flew from her finger tips they looked reddish black, and her ring too, when she watched it move with the gesture of her hand, was full of novel red tints.

Someone entered the sandwich bar through an outside door and she heard talk come loud from there, like the voices of a pair of announcers.

"Allo, Ace."

"Allo, Eugene."

"It's a bad night."

"It's snowing over West."

"It'll snow here before morning."

The child twisted beside her in its mother's arms. It muttered demandingly in its sleep. Its foot slipped from where it had lain hidden inside the mother's coat. Mary saw that the foot was covered only with a stocking, and the stocking looked like a small sack bulging full of hazelnuts.

She wanted to reach out and touch the grotesque little foot. It was as though she ought to make some obeisance to it in passing. The feeling was so strong that it nearly overcame her tact, but she knew that she would not reach out. Nevertheless, the impulse of sympathy made her lift her eyes to the mother, and she saw then that the mother's face was incomplete. The woman's eyes met hers out of a bland mask of skin that had no shape for a nose except a bulge with nostril holes and no ridges to define a brow.

"Seems like that darn bus won't never come," the woman whined. She grappled the child higher on her lap, pulling its foot inside her coat again.

"It's nearly time for it now," Mary said. She consulted her watch, shook it, and held it to her ear. "I guess I don't know exactly what time it is, but I'm sure the bus must be due in a minute."

"It should've been here before the Iowa City bus come," the woman said.

"Come? You mean came?" Mary asked. "But it hasn't come yet. It's due about this time."

"It come," the woman said.

"But when?"

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"I dunno," the woman said. "We haven't got no watches."

"Before I got here?"

"Oh my yes."

Feeling that her confusion and dismay must be plain on her face, Mary believed that when the woman smiled now it was with malice, and at any rate the smile was horrible for her to watch. The woman's mouth opened to reveal a tiny rim of teeth, each one broad enough but hardly emerging from the gum — like the white tips of fingernails.

"Oh," Mary said. "I just assumed that you were going to Iowa City too, and . . . I didn't know there was another bus. Well, of course I knew there were others that went through the junction, but not . . . I'd better try to find out, hadn't I?" She nodded a confused appeasement and goodby to the woman and walked rapidly up the steps to the sandwich bar.

"Please," she said to the man behind the counter, "has the Iowa City bus gone yet?"

"One of them has," he said. He was wiping glasses. His sleeves were half rolled up to expose arms slick with a reddish mat of hair. "What's the matter? Miss connections?"

"I don't know. When's the next one?"

"Couple of hours."

"If it don't get held up by the snow." The man sitting at the end of the counter was speaking. "You can't tell this time of year." His voice was extremely loud — too loud for the close range — but unsubstantial in a lardy way.

She sank on one of the stools near the center of the counter and said, "I don't understand. They told me in Ottumwa I'd only have a ten minute wait." In her cascading disappointment it seemed to her that if she could only state her expectations coherently they would somehow be true in spite of time and the gap of distance widening between the place she sat and the physical bus, now an unknown number of miles to the East. Superstitiously she half-expected to hear the horn of the Eastbound bus sound while she proceeded to explain to the counter man the whole of her transactions at the ticket office and how the bus which brought her had driven briskly and on schedule, she supposed, in spite of the rain.

"No." The man behind the counter had stopped drying glasses to devote himself to the conversation. "You must've gone to sleep or dreamed or something if you thought you was on time. The driver told us there was a semi tipped over on the road by North English that you had to wait forty minutes for them to get it pulled away."

"I couldn't have," she said, appealing to him. "I remember the whole trip. I could not have gone to sleep."

"Kid, none of us can ever go to sleep. None of us can ever dream something. Certainly not. Only we do. How about that, Eugene?"

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"That's right, Ace. You must have been asleep, kid, if you thought that bus got here on time."

"Well . . ." she straightened her back stubbornly and lifted her chin. "All right," she said, "only it's this, having to wait here I mean, that seems like a bad dream." She laughed to them in a friendly way, but neither even smiled in return.

"This place is no dream," Ace said. He picked up another glass and rubbed it with the towel.

She tried to explain, believing that perhaps the two men were simply not bright enough to catch the point of her joking comment, but they only watched her and listened noncommittally. Presently she realized that Ace was staring at her hands, and she wished they were gloved.

"If I have to wait," she said, "maybe you've got some magazines or Pocketbooks I could read. Two hours is a long time to wait."

"You're going to live a long time, kid," the man called Eugene said. "Get used to it." He began to laugh very hard.

Ace was shaking his head. "We've got nothing here but some food and a rest room. That's all we got. Maybe you could sleep some more. Like you did on the bus."

"Oh nuts," she said petulantly. She rose from the stool and went to the front door, looking out for a while at the encompassing rain and the blackness. There was traffic on the highways that converged here, still quite a lot. The shapes of headlights, like capricious nebulae, grew substantial out of the rainy distance, seeming without motion at first and gathering speed until they whipped by as comets might pass from dark to dark across the tiny illumined face of the earth. Watching them she had the fancy that it was just such a growing and vanishing light — not even having or needing the structure of the bus to move it or hold it to its course — that had brought her here to this place, and no light could ever carry her weight away.

But then she thought, how silly an idea. She reminded herself that it was mere good sense to settle comfortably for a bit — a couple of hours, that was all.

She turned to the room and the men and ordered a sandwich.

"You're burning it," she said impatiently. Ace had gone to the end of the counter to carry on a whispered conversation with Eugene while the ham for her sandwich fried. She had not heard what they whispered about — and had tried not to listen — but still it had come insistently down to her, especially the points at which Eugene would whisper loudly, "I can't," and then again with a hissing laughter, "I can't." While they were absorbed, the meat Ace had thrown on the griddle sizzled briskly and then began to smoke. The white-and-pink edges curled up from the heat and

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blackened. Then the pleasant odor of it turned to the smell of burning before she spoke.

Ace looked at her disdainfully. "Got to let it get done," he said. He did not move from where he half lay across the counter with his head close to Eugene's.

"Are you burning it on purpose?" she said. The pitch of her own voice startled her.

He ambled to the griddle, his reddish arms swinging slack by the sides of his apron. The expression on his face, she thought, was a baffling mixture of humility and contempt, and she could not understand what he saw in her that should have bred such feelings. At the same time she felt sure there was something about her, definite as the blue and white pattern of her suit, which he had noted, and which was making him behave this way.

He lifted the meat onto a slice of bread, covered it with another slice that he flipped from the stack beside the stove like a card dealt from a deck, and put it in front of her.

She leaned forward in anger. "What do you want me to do with that?" She half nodded down at the spoiled thing on her plate.

"Do with it?" he asked with the same mixture of abjection and arrogance she had seen in his walk. "Why, eat it."

"I will not," she said. She felt her hands begin trembling and knew she could not bear the onslaught of his hostility much longer without beginning to cry. She drew a little back and opened her purse for money. The sight of the yellow bus ticket still lying in it, not lost but still secure, was almost a surprise and in her state of mind a surprisingly firm reassurance. She put thirty cents on the counter and whirled to go back down the steps into the waiting room.

Behind her she heard Ace saying, "Got to have another penny. We got taxes in Iowa." And she heard Eugene laughing fatly from his corner.

Again she took her seat beside the woman with the crippled child, who seemed now to have sunk into sleep, huddled far over the child in her lap like a motionless and crude representation of grief. As soon as Mary was seated the woman said, "What made you ask if we was going to Iowa City, like you did.

"I wasn't thinking," Mary said. "I suppose I was thinking about the bus I wanted to take. That's all."

"Oh." The woman's head nodded, but after a small silence she insisted, "It's kind of funny you saying that because we have been once to the State's hospital. It was for the boy's foot. The old doctor the County has made us go up there, but they ain't going to do nothing for him. Hospitals ain't any good."

"They're handy sometimes," Mary said. She leaned her face back against the collar of her coat and wished the woman would stop talking to her.

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The woman muttered incoherently, the sound like some memory of anger or disappointment. "I don't think they are at all," she said. "Nor them old doctors that won't leave you alone and won't do a thing for you. It's only Christ and Him crucified that will help you. My older boy he lost his arm one winter and they took him and the County put some kind of a rig onto him that they called an arm, but he couldn't no more use it than I can fly. And the girls they're all the time bleeding and coughing and they got them sores they can't get rid of so they can't hardly go to school any time at all. Then there was my Ma, she had a tumor on her that came out of her side. It was as big as a pumpkin. Why I remember she couldn't even get a bathrobe on her, just sit around in a blanket all the time at home, and the doctors didn't know a thing they could do about it, just to thump her and squeeze her around and make her cry . . ."

"Please," Mary said.

"And with all that pain it was only Christ and Him crucified that give her relief."

"Please," Mary said.

"Oh," the woman said. "Maybe you want to go to sleep and I won't talk to you if you want to sleep. Do you want me to be quiet?"

"I would like to sleep," Mary said.

She really did manage to sleep, passing through graded stages of semi-consciousness in the first of which she was still aware of the glow of the restroom signs, the chuckle of voices from the sandwich bar, and the sound of breathing from the waiting people around the room. And when she woke she found herself circled by all of them.

The woman with the child was still sitting on her left, but the others stood close around her as though they were watching. Ace was directly in front of her with fat Eugene beside him, Eugene's body slanted massively toward her and his shoulders stretched upward with crutches. Ace was staring at her hands in her lap, and again she was queerly aware of the nakedness of her hands.

"Is the bus here?" she asked, as though this simplest of questions might conjure them back away from her.

A sort of humming murmur ran around the circle, but she heard one voice answer clearly, "Not yet."

"What is it then? What's the matter?" she asked. In her fear it seemed that the circle of people edged closer to her. She saw that a young man on her left had his arm in a white sling. A loose lock of hair fell attractively across his forehead. His mouth was partially open as he stared at her.

There were a man and woman behind Ace whose torsos were hidden from her, but when she saw that the other two on his left both had hooks glittering below their sleeves she

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thought crazily, I don't dare look down because there won't be enough feet for all of them.

"Why are you watching me?" she said. The circle hummed again and then edged back from her as she got up. She saw the neon sign WOMEN and put up her hands to fight her way to that door, but the circle opened to let her pass through.

Inside she slid the bolt and stood panting. She wanted not to believe the thing that had just happened, but then she realized she could neither believe nor disbelieve because she did not know what it was that had happened.

I can wait here, she thought, until the Iowa City bus honks outside and then run for it. Then with all the people on the bus, they wouldn't dare . . . Dare what? she thought. She did not know.

Possibly it was snowing by now and the bus was delayed. There was a tiny window in the room, but she could not bring herself to open it to check the weather. She listened against its frosted glass. She heard the sound of rain.

Naturally while she waited in there, trembling and gasping, she thought of Joe Perry's being there, of how splendid a dream it might still be if he should defend and rescue her, but quickly after she had thought of him she was glad he could not know the terrible and silly predicament she was in.

She let warm water run into the basin and put her hands in it. This was a trick she had learned to use when she felt faint. As she stood there soaking her hands she looked around the walls of the room, as though she were looking for a ladder to climb out with. A penciled inscription caught her eye. She leaned to read it. It seemed that it might have been put there on purpose to carry a message to her.

The neat script said, "*Ace Power is not a whole man.*" Just above it there was a lipstick print of lips.

Mary thrust her hands in the water again. I can't pass out, she thought. The bus might go by while she was fainted and she would have to stay forever. The water refracted the image of her hands so they seemed no longer neat and useful things, but broken and uneven. It occurred to her that she could no longer hear the rain outside.

A craftiness that she had not known she possessed took over her mind. She lifted her hands out of the water, stared at them, put them back in, staring and staring. Her eyes went over the whole interior of the room until she saw what she wanted. There was a nail point protruding from the bottom of the window sill.

They'll let me out with them now, she said to herself, and in the moment of that wisdom jerked her palm across the nail.

"Aaaaah," she moaned, quite loudly enough for them to hear in the waiting room if they were listening. She put her torn hand in the

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basin of water and the blood boiled delicately up around her fingers. Like the ink a squid shoots out to hide itself, she thought, remembering some grade school lesson in natural history. With a handkerchief she wrapped the hand and went out.

All of them sat where they had been when she first came into the room. Ace Power was behind his counter and no one was paying the least bit of attention to her. She sat down for the third time that evening beside the woman with the crippled child. She left her wrapped hand lying on her lap as a kind of badge for them to see if they wanted to. And presently, when her bus had come in with a merry honking, she took her ticket from her purse and held it in the damaged hand until the driver collected it.

Now, when she got to the dormitory the girls would not ask first about her engagement, but ask, "What happened to you?" There would be no way in this world to explain it to them, but that was all right. It seemed to her that far away in the secret of their future lives they would come to understand it and then remember.

Note:

If you enjoy THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, you will like some of the other MERCURY PUBLICATIONS:

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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

A REVIEWER TRIES TO EXERCISE relative judgment. In a year (like most years, it must be admitted) when nothing is, in the eyes of the Ages, of the absolute first rank, he recommends and praises the best of what's available. But then what does he do when he's present (or so he thinks) at the birth of one of the pure unquestionable classics of the century?

What happened 27 years ago when the mystery reviewers who had been praising Fletcher and Van Dine met up with Dashiell Hammett? How did the drama reviewers of the turn of the century differentiate between the relatively commendable plays of Jones and Pinero and the masterpieces of George Bernard Shaw? What did musical comedy reviewers who had lauded RIO RITA and MY MARYLAND say when they heard SHOW BOAT?

Well, to be honest, the answer is that in most cases they saw no marked difference in kind; critical hindsight has its advantages over the contemporary reviewer.

Still, I wish I could readily establish some kind of qualitative differentiation between my praise of the average good (or even very good) fantasy novel and my urgent recommendation of J. R. R. Tolkien's imaginative trilogy, THE LORD OF THE RINGS.

Something of this differentiation was successfully indicated by the New York *Times Book Review* in its coverage of the last volume in the trilogy, THE RETURN OF THE KING (Houghton Mifflin, $5*). When has a fantasy novel ever before taken up an entire page of the *Times*, in a long essay-review by so important a poet and critic as W. H. Auden? And Mr. Auden makes clear the reason for this emphasis in a key sentence: "As I believe, Mr. Tolkien has succeeded more completely than any previous writer in this genre in using the traditional properties of the Quest, the heroic journey, the Numinous Object, the conflict between Good and Evil, while at the same time satisfying our sense of historical and social reality."

The Tolkien trilogy — of which the earlier volumes were THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING and THE TWO TOWERS (Houghton Mifflin, $5* each) — tells of a quest, a journey and a mighty war in the Middle World inhabited by men and hobbits, elves and dwarves, orkhs and ents, a world bound and ruled by Rings of Power which symbolize

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Lord Acton's maxim; the purpose of quest, journey and war (to oversimplify) is the destruction of the ultimate Ring and the return of free will.

The epic trilogy runs to half a million words (by way of comparison, Isaac Asimov's seemingly enormous FOUNDATION series is only half as long); and this length is the source of both its power and its one weakness. Such length makes it possible for Tolkien to create the entire history and culture of each race of the Middle World down to every least minutia — so much so that Auden writes, "No previous writer has, to my knowledge, created an imaginary world and a feigned history in such detail." (And what details happen not to fit into the narrative are set forth in an absorbing series of historic and linguistic appendices to the last volume.)

The weakness (and perhaps this is purely a personal reaction) is that wordage seems sometimes to be protracted for its own sake, inducing mild tedium or at best an inclination to skip hastily forward, even at the risk of missing some superb prose-poetry.

And even this minor weakness is hardly in evidence in the closing THE RETURN OF THE KING, a masterly narration of tremendous and terrible climactic events.

I have, I know, still not managed to convey the true quality of this epic — nor did Auden wholly succeed in his much longer piece. I have not mentioned the gentle down-to-earth humor provided by the unmatchable hobbits, nor the extraordinary way in which all of the races of the Middle World, each a wholly credible individual creation, combine meaningfully to represent the infinite facets of the soul of Man.

I can only say that anyone with the faintest interest in imaginative literature must at least sample THE LORD OF THE RINGS. Not everyone will find it to his taste; it will never appear on any bestseller lists — nor, I am assured, will it ever be forgotten. The only comparable creation that I know in all literature is E. R. Eddison's THE WORM OUROBOROS (and many will be the partisan battles as to which is the greater work); and both sagas will possess meaning and magic for the Martian colonists who will smile at our quaintly dated imaginings of the space-future.

Waveney Girvan's FLYING SAUCERS AND COMMON SENSE (Citadel, $3.50) is only the second saucer book I've received so far this year, but publishers' announcements threaten an inundation comparable to that of 1955. Mr. Girvan is a British publisher who, to his credit, commissioned Gerald Heard's erratic but charming THE RIDDLE OF THE FLYING SAUCERS (published in this country as IS ANOTHER WORLD WATCHING?) and, to his almost immeasurable discredit, foisted upon

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the world the works of George Adamski. His own book is as mixed as his publishing record. Much of it is an interesting and documentarily valuable history of saucerism in British publishing, newspaper and book, with some good counterattacks upon such overeager fishmongers (to use a Fortean phrase) as Donald H. Menzel. But too often Girvan is forced, ineluctably, to defend the indefensible Sage of Palomar; and he has a weakness for apparently scoring points by "answering" absurd arguments which no reputable anti-saucerist has advanced.

I cannot resist the temptation to quote an excerpt from the catalog of Mr. Girvan's publishing house, T. Werner Laurie. This firm is the proud publisher of Stella Clair's SUSIE SAUCER AND RONNIE ROCKET, subtitled "the first fairy-tale from outer space" and synopsized as follows:

"Susie Saucer, the youngest of all the Flying Saucers, was chosen by Flame, the Lord of the planet Venus, to fly with him to Earth. They travelled most of the long journey in Jupiter, but when they reached the sky just above earth, Flame who intended to visit some Earthmen, told Susie to wait for him until he got back. Susie soon became extremely bored and just as she had settled herself peevishly down in a damp cloud, Ronnie, a most handsome earth-made Rocket appeared. Soon they became firm friends and Susie, unable to resist the temptation of playing with him, disobeyed Flame's orders and they both flew off together.

"That was the start of trouble for Susie and Ronnie and the exciting story that follows is bound to delight all space-minded youngsters." (To say nothing of precocious enthusiasts of phallic symbolism.)

Beside the escapade of Susie and Ronnie, such an American saucer-juvenile as John M. Schealer's ZIP-ZIP AND HIS FLYING SAUCER (Dutton, $2.50*) seems tame. This is a mild incident of a spaceboy who helps a family of earthchildren — a harmless story, apparently addressed to the lowest limit of its nominal 8-to-12 audience.

Devout saucerians will enjoy the reissue of R. DeWitt Miller's FORGOTTEN MYSTERIES (Citadel, $3*) even though it is unrevised from its 1947 version and therefore does not label the lights in the sky as "saucers." More critical students of the unknown will find Miller a barely passable road company Fort, full of fascinating "facts" but vexatiously slipshod on details and documentation. Harold Leland Goodwin's 1954 THE SCIENCE BOOK OF SPACE TRAVEL has been extensively and ably rewritten for its paper edition (Pocket Books-Cardinal, 35¢) in view of our government's satellite program, and remains one of the best brief simple accounts of its subject. It includes, incidentally, an admirable middle-of-the-road chapter on saucers.

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A significant non-fiction reprint is that of (I deeply regret to say) the late Robert Lindner's THE FIFTY-MINUTE HOUR (Bantam, 35c). This contains the memorable *The Jet-Propelled Couch* (F&SF, January, 1956) with more specific sexual detail than we felt advisable in a magazine; the 4 other essays have nothing to do with science fiction but are among the most readable and illuminating psychological case histories yet written. Lindner's recent and sudden death has deprived American letters of a vividly stimulating non-conformist intellect — something which any culture can ill afford to lose.

Hardcover science fiction publication has been dwindling to the merest trickle in 1956; and the only two recent s.f. novels were, somewhat precautionarily, both published as general fiction.

John G. Schneider's THE GOLDEN KAZOO (Rinehart, $3.50*) extrapolates current trends in both major political parties to tell how the advertising agencies finally take over completely from the politicos and win (for the Republicans) the presidential election of 1960. A little weak on inventive story-line, it's excellent in knowing satire of both advertising and politics — a funny and pointed combination of THE SPACE MERCHANTS and OF THEE I SING (and like the latter, might make an excellent satiric musical).

Frank M. Robinson's THE POWER (Lippincott, $3*) is the *n*th novel upon the theme of *Homo superior* alone against the mass of *Homo sapiens*, this time with *H. sup.* viewed as a monster-menace hardly inferior to the Creature from the Black Lagoon. You'd never know that Robinson was an old s.f. pro; the sciencefictional thinking is . . . well, not so much absurd as just absent: the guy's a superman, ain't he, so he can do *anything*, see? But though there has never been a less credible picture of the next step in evolution, Robinson knows how to tell one hell of a suspense-melodrama; and you may find yourself breathing fast despite yourself.

Two collections of s.f. shorts are both somewhat disappointing from authors of such standing. The 10 stories in Frederik Pohl's ALTERNATING CURRENTS (Ballantine, $2*; paper, 35c) seem largely slight and hasty in view of Pohl's best work as an editor or as a collaborative novelist; but if few of the stories are ultimately satisfying, they still reveal much wit and imagination. Of the 12 stories in Arthur C. Clarke's REACH FOR TOMORROW (Ballantine, $2*; paper, 35c), the shorter items are rather too obviously minor works omitted from his fine first collection, EXPEDITION TO EARTH; but 2 novelets are uniquely authentic Clarke, and in themselves well worth the purchase price.

*Books marked with an asterisk may be ordered through F&SF's Readers' Book Service. For details, see page 128.

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Charles L. Fontenay has been in the newspaper business for twenty years and is now a rewrite man for the Nashville Tennessean. *He is also a prize-winning painter, a champion chessplayer, a political ghostwriter, a landscape gardener and a practitioner of Chinese cookery. Recently, to fill in his spare time, he has taken to writing science fiction, of which he's been an enthusiast since his teens. His first story appeared twenty-two months ago, and since then he's been selling regularly, for reasons that you'll find here in his F&SF debut, in which the account of one of man's most disastrous landings on alien worlds becomes a story rich in warmth and hope.*

The Silk and the Song

by CHARLES L. FONTENAY

ALAN FIRST SAW THE STAR TOWER when he was twelve years old. His young master, Blik, rode him into the city of Falklyn that day.

Blik had to argue hard before he got permission to ride Alan, his favorite boy. Blik's father, Wiln, wanted Blik to ride a man, because Wiln thought the long trip to the city might be too much for a boy as young as Alan.

Blik had his way, though. Blik was rather spoiled, and when he began to whistle, his father gave in.

"All right, the human is rather big for its age," surrendered Wiln. "You may ride it if you promise not to run it. I don't want you breaking the wind of any of my prize stock."

So Blik strapped the bridle-helmet with the handgrips on Alan's head and threw the saddle-chair on Alan's shoulders. Wiln saddled up Robb, a husky man he often rode on long trips, and they were off to the city at an easy trot.

The Star Tower was visible before they reached Falklyn. Alan could see its spire above the tops of the ttornot trees as soon as they emerged from the Blue Forest. Blik saw it at the same time. Holding onto the bridle-helmet with one four-fingered hand, Blik poked Alan and pointed.

"Look, Alan, the Star Tower!" cried Blik. "They say humans once lived in the Star Tower."

"Blik, when will you grow up and stop talking to the humans?" chided his father. "I'm going to punish you severely one of these days."

Alan did not answer Blik, for it

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was forbidden for humans to talk in the Hussir language except in reply to direct questions. But he kept his eager eyes on the Star Tower and watched it loom taller and taller ahead of them, striking into the sky far above the buildings of the city. He quickened his pace, so that he began to pull ahead of Robb, and Robb had to caution him.

Between the Blue Forest and Falklyn, they were still in wild country, where the land was eroded and there were no farms and fields. Little clumps of ttornot trees huddled here and there among the gullies and low hills, thickening back toward the Blue Forest behind them, thinning toward the northwest plain beyond which lay the distant mountains.

They rounded a curve in the dusty road, and Blik whistled in excitement from Alan's shoulders. A figure stood on a little promontory overhanging the road ahead of them.

At first Alan thought it was a tall, slender Hussir, for a short jacket partly concealed its nakedness. Then he saw it was a young human girl. No Hussir ever boasted that mop of tawny hair, that tailless posterior curve.

"A Wild Human!" growled Wiln in astonishment. Alan shivered. It was rumored the Wild Humans killed Hussirs and ate other humans.

The girl was looking away toward Falklyn. Wiln unslung his short bow and loosed an arrow at her.

The bolt exploded the dust near her feet. With a toss of bright hair, she turned her head and saw them. Then she was gone like a deer.

When they came up to where she had stood, there was a brightness in the bushes beside the road. It was a pair of the colorful trousers such as Hussirs wore, only trimmer, tangled inextricably in a thorny bush. Evidently the girl had been caught as she climbed up from the road, and had had to crawl out of them.

"They're getting too bold," said Wiln angrily. "This close to civilization, in broad daylight!"

Alan was astonished when they entered Falklyn. The streets and buildings were of stone. There was little stone on the other side of the Blue Forest, and Wiln Castle was built of polished wooden blocks. The smooth stone of Falklyn's streets was hot under the double sun. It burned Alan's feet, so that he hobbled a little and shook Blik up. Blik clouted him on the side of the head for it.

There were so many strange new things to see in the city that they made Alan dizzy. Some of the buildings were as much as three stories high, and the windows of a few of the biggest were covered, not with wooden shutters, but with a bright, transparent stuff, that Wiln told Blik was called "glaz." Robb told Alan in the human language, which the Hussirs did not understand, that it was rumored humans themselves

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had invented this glaz and given it to their masters. Alan wondered how a human could invent anything, penned in open fields.

But it appeared that humans in the city lived closer to their masters. Several times Alan saw them coming out of houses, and a few that he saw were not entirely naked, but wore bright bits of cloth at various places on their bodies. Wiln expressed strong disapproval of this practice to Blik.

"Start putting clothing on these humans and they might get the idea they're Hussirs," he said. "If you ask me, that's why city people have more trouble controlling their humans than we do. Spoil the human and you make him savage, I say."

They had several places to go in Falklyn, and for a while Alan feared they would not see the Star Tower at close range. But Blik had never seen it before, and he begged and whistled until Wiln agreed to ride a few streets out of the way to look at it.

Alan forgot all the other wonders of Falklyn as the great monument towered bigger and bigger, dwarfing the buildings around it, dwarfing the whole city of Falklyn. There was a legend that humans had not only lived in the Star Tower once, but that they had built it and Falklyn had grown up around it when the humans abandoned it. Alan had heard this whispered, but he had been warned not to repeat it, for some Hussirs understood human language and repeating such tales was a good way to get whipped.

The Star Tower was in the center of a big circular park, and the houses around the park looked like doll houses beneath it. It stretched up into the sky like a pointing finger, its strange dark walls reflecting the dual sunlight dully. Even the flying buttresses at its base curved up above the big trees in the park around it.

There was a railing round the park, and quite a few humans were chained or standing loose about it while their riders were looking at the Star Tower, for humans were not allowed inside the park. Blik was all for dismounting and looking at the inside of the tower, but Wiln would not hear of it.

"There'll be plenty of time for that when you're older and can understand some of the things you see," said Wiln.

They moved slowly around the street, outside the rail. In the park, the Hussirs moved in groups, some of them going up or coming down the long ramp that led into the Star Tower. The Hussirs were only about half the size of humans, with big heads and large pointed ears sticking straight out on each side, with thin legs and thick tails that helped to balance them. They wore loose jackets and baggy colored trousers.

As they passed one group of humans standing outside the rail, Alan heard a familiar bit of verse, sung in an undertone:

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"Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,
I can reach you, though you're far.
Shut my mouth and find my head,
Find a worm —"

Wiln swung Robb around quickly, and laid his keen whip viciously across the singer's shoulders. Slash, slash, and red welts sprang out on the man's back. With a muffled shriek, the man ducked his head and threw up his arms to protect his face.

"Where is your master, human?" demanded Wiln savagely, the whip trembling in his four-fingered hand.

"My master lives in Northwesttown, your greatness," whimpered the human. "I belong to the merchant, Senk."

"Where is Northwesttown?"

"It is a section of Falklyn, sir."

"And you are here at the Star Tower without your master?"

"Yes, sir. I am on free time."

Wiln gave him another lash with the whip.

"You should know humans are not allowed to run loose near the Star Tower," Wiln snapped. "Now go back to your master and tell him to whip you."

The human ran off. Wiln and Blik turned their mounts homeward. When they were beyond the streets and houses of the town and the dust of the roads provided welcome relief to the burning feet of the humans, Blik asked:

"What did you think of the Star Tower, Alan?"

"Why has it no windows?" Alan asked, voicing the thought uppermost in his mind.

It was not, strictly speaking, an answer to Blik's question, and Alan risked punishment by speaking thus in Hussir. But Wiln had recovered his good humor, with the prospect of getting home in time for supper.

"The windows are in the very top, little human," said Wiln indulgently. "You couldn't see them, because they're inside."

Alan puzzled over this all the way to Wiln Castle. How could windows be inside and none outside? If windows were windows, didn't they always go through both sides of a wall?

When the two suns had set and Alan was bedded down with the other children in a corner of the meadow, the exciting events of the day repeated themselves in his mind like a series of colored pictures. He would have liked to question Robb, but the grown men and older boys were kept in a field well separated from the women and children.

A little distance away the women were singing their babies to sleep with the traditional songs of the humans. Their voices drifted to him on the faint breeze, with the perfume of the fragrant grasses.

"Rock-a-bye, baby, in mother's arms,
Nothing's nearby to do baby harm.
Sleep and sweet dreams, till both suns
arise,

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Then will be the time to open your eyes."

That was a real baby song, the first he ever remembered. They sang others, and one was the song Wiln had interrupted at the Star Tower.

"*Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,*
I can reach you, though you're far.
Shut my mouth and find my head,
Find a worm that's striped with red,
Feed it to the turtle shell,
Then go to sleep, for all is well."

Half asleep, Alan listened. That song was one of the children's favorites. They called it "The Star Tower Song," though he had never been able to find out why.

It must be a riddle, he thought drowsily. "*Shut my mouth and find my head . . .*" Shouldn't it be the other way around — "*Find my head* (first) *and shut my mouth . . .*"? Why wasn't it? And those other lines. Alan knew worms, for he had seen many of the creepy, crawly creatures, long things in many bright colors. But what was a turtle?

The refrain of another song reached his ears, and it seemed to the sleepy boy that they were singing it to him.

"*Alan saw a little bird,*
Its wings were all aglow
He followed it away one night
It filled his heart with woe."

Only that wasn't the last line the children themselves sang. Optimistically, they always ended that song. ". . . *To where he liked to go.*"

Maybe he was asleep and dreamed it, or maybe he suddenly waked up with the distant music in his ears. Whichever it was, he was lying there, and a zird flew over the high fence and lit in the grass near him. Its luminous scales pulsed in the darkness, faintly lighting the faces of the children huddled asleep around him. It opened its beak and spoke to him in a raucous voice.

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird. "Come with me to freedom, human."

That was all it could say, and it repeated the invitation at least half a dozen times, until it grated on Alan's ears. But Alan knew that, despite the way the children sang the song, it brought only sorrow to a human to heed the call of a zird.

"Go away, zird," he said crossly, and the zird flew over the fence and faded into the darkness.

Sighing, Alan went back to sleep to dream of the Star Tower.

II

Blik died three years later. The young Hussir's death brought sorrow to Alan's heart, for Blik had been kind to him and their relationship was the close one of well-loved pet and master. The deprivation always would be associated to him with another emotional change in his life, for Blik's death came the day after Wiln caught Alan with the blonde girl down by the stream and

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transferred him to the field with the older boys and men.

"Switch it, I hope the boy hasn't gotten her with child," grumbled Wiln to his oldest son, Snuk, as they drove Alan to the new meadow. "I hadn't planned to add that girl to the milking herd for another year yet."

"That comes of letting Blik make a pet out of the human," said Snuk, who was nearly grown now and was being trained in the art of managing Wiln Castle to succeed his father. "It should have been worked while Blik has been sick, instead of allowed to roam idly around among the women and children."

Through the welter of new emotions that confused him, Alan recognized the justice of that remark. It had been pure boredom with the play of the younger children that had turned his interest to more mature experimentation. At that, he realized that only the aloofness he had developed as a result of being Blik's pet had prevented his being taken to the other field at least two years earlier.

He looked back over his shoulder. The tearful girl stood forlornly, watching him go. She waved and called after him.

"Maybe we'll see each other again at mating time."

He waved back at her, drawing a sharp cut across the shoulders from Snuk's whip. They would not turn him in with the women at mating time for at least another three years, but the girl was almost of mating age. By the time she saw him again, she probably would have forgotten him.

His transfer into adulthood was an immediate ordeal. Wiln and Snuk remained just outside the fence and whistled delightedly at the hazing Alan was given by the men and older boys. The ritual would have been more difficult for him had it not been so long delayed, but he found a place in the scheme of things somewhat high for a newcomer because he was older than most of them and big for his age. Scratched and battered, he gained the necessary initial respect from his new associates by trouncing several boys his own size.

That night, lonely and unhappy, Alan heard the keening of the Hussirs rise from Wiln Castle. The night songs of the men, deeper and lustier than those of the women and children, faded and stopped as the sound of mourning drifted to them on the wind. Alan knew it meant that Blik's long illness was over, that his young master was dead.

He found a secluded corner of the field and cried himself to sleep under the stars. He had loved Blik.

After Blik's death, Alan thought he might be put with the laboring men, to pull the plows and work the crops. He knew he did not have the training for work in and around the castle itself, and he did not think he would be retained with the riding stock.

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But Snuk had different ideas.

"I saw your good qualities as a riding human before Blik ever picked you out for a pet," Snuk told him, laying his pointed ears back viciously. Snuk used the human language, for it was Snuk's theory that one could control humans better when one could listen in on their conversations among themselves. "Blik spoiled all the temper out of you, but I'll change that. I may be able to salvage you yet."

It was only a week since Blik's death, and Alan was still sad. Dispiritedly, he cooperated when Snuk put the bridle-helmet and saddle-chair on him, and knelt for Snuk to climb on his back.

When Alan stood up, Snuk jammed spurs savagely into his sides.

Alan leaped three feet into the air with an agonized yell.

"Silence, human!" shouted Snuk, beating him over the head with the whip. "I shall teach you to obey. Spurs mean go, like so!"

And he dug the spurs into Alan's ribs again.

Alan twisted and turned momentarily, but his common sense saved him. Had he fallen to the ground and rolled, or tried to rub Snuk off against a ttornot tree, it would have meant death for him. There was no appeal from his new master's cruelty.

A third time Snuk applied the spurs and Alan spurted down the tree-lined lane away from the castle at a dead run. Snuk gave him his head and raked his sides brutally. It was only when he slowed to a walk, panting and perspiring, that Snuk pulled on the reins and turned him back toward the castle. Then the Hussir forced him to trot back.

Wiln was waiting at the corral when they returned.

"Aren't you treating it a little rough, Snuk?" asked the older Hussir, looking the exhausted Alan up and down critically. Blood streamed from Alan's gashed sides.

"Just teaching it right at the outset who is master," replied Snuk casually. With an unnecessarily sharp rap on the head, he sent Alan to his knees and dismounted. "I think this one will make a valuable addition to my stable of riders, but I don't intend to pamper it like Blik did."

Wiln flicked his ears.

"Well, you've proved you know how to handle humans by now, and you'll be master of them all in a few years," he said mildly. "Just take your father's advice, and don't break this one's wind."

The next few months were misery to Alan. He had the physical qualities Snuk liked in a mount, and Snuk rode him more frequently than any of his other saddle men.

Snuk liked to ride fast, and he ran Alan unmercifully. They would return at the end of a hot afternoon, Alan bathed in sweat and so tired his limbs trembled uncontrollably.

Besides, Snuk was an uncompromising master with more than a touch

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of cruelty in his makeup. He would whip Alan savagely for minor inattention, for failure to respond promptly to the reins, for speaking at all in his presence. Alan's back was soon covered with spur scars, and one eye often was half closed from a whip lash across the face.

In desperation, Alan sought the counsel of his old friend, Robb, whom he saw often now that he was in the men's field.

"There's nothing you can do," Robb said. "I just thank the Golden Star that Wiln rides me and I'll be too old for Snuk to ride when Wiln dies. But then Snuk will be master of us all, and I dread that day."

"Couldn't one of us kill Snuk against a tree?" asked Alan. He had thought of doing it himself.

"Never think such a thought," warned Robb quickly. "If that happened, all the riding men would be butchered for meat. The Wiln family has enough money to buy new riding stables in Falklyn if they wish, and no Hussir will put up with a rebellious human."

That night Alan nursed his freshest wounds beside the fence closest to the women's and children's field and gave himself up to nostalgia. He longed for the happy days of his childhood and Blik's kind mastery.

Across the intervening fields, faintly, he heard the soft voices of the women. He could not make out the words, but he remembered them from the tune:

"Star light, star bright,
Star that sheds a golden light,
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Reach you, star that shines at night."

From behind him came the voices of the men, nearer and louder:

"Human, see the little zird,
Its wings are all aglow.
Don't follow it away at night,
For fear of grief and woe."

The children had sung it differently. And there had been a dream. . . .

It was the strangest coincidence. It reminded him of that night long ago, the night after he had gone into Falklyn with Blik and first seen the Star Tower. Even as the words of the song died away in the night air, he saw the glow of the zird approaching. It lit on top of the fence and squawked down at him.

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird.

Alan had seen many zirds at night — they appeared only at night — and had heard their call. It was the only thing they said, always in the human language: "Come with me to freedom, human."

As he had before, he wondered. A zird was only a scaly-winged little night creature. How could it speak human words? Where did zirds come from, and where did they go in the daytime? For the first time in his life, he asked the zird a question.

"What and where is freedom, zird?" Alan asked.

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"Come with me to freedom, human," repeated the zird. It flapped its wings, rising a few inches above the fence, and settled back on its perch.

"Is that all you can say, zird?" asked Alan irritably. "How can I go with you when I can't fly?"

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird.

A great boldness surged in Alan's heart, spurred by the dreary prospect of having to endure Snuk's sadism again on the morrow. He looked at the fence.

Alan had never paid much attention to a fence before. Humans did not try to get out of the fenced enclosures, because the story parents told to children who tried it was that strayed humans were always recaptured and butchered for meat.

The links of the fence were close together, but he could get his fingers and toes through them. Tentatively, he tried it. A mounting excitement taking possession of him, he climbed.

It was ridiculously easy. He was in the next field. There were other fences, of course, but they could be climbed. He could go into the field with the women — his heart beat faster at the thought of the blonde girl — or he could even climb his way to the open road to Falklyn.

It was the road he chose, after all. The zird flew ahead of him across each field, lighting to wait for him to climb each fence. He crept along the fence past the crooning women with a muffled sigh, through the field of ripening akko grain, through the waist-high sento plants. At last he climbed the last fence of all.

He was off the Wiln estate. The dust of the road to Falklyn was beneath his feet.

What now? If he went into Falklyn, he would be captured and returned to Wiln Castle. If he went the other way the same thing would happen. Stray humans were spotted easily. Should he turn back now? It would be easy to climb his way back to the men's field — and there would be innumerable nights ahead of him when the women's field would be easily accessible to him.

But there was Snuk to consider.

For the first time since he had climbed out of the men's field, the zird spoke.

"Come with me to freedom, human," it said.

It flew down the road, away from Falklyn, and lit in the dust, as though waiting. After a moment's hesitation, Alan followed.

The lights of Wiln Castle loomed up to his left, up the lane of ttornot trees. They fell behind and disappeared over a hill. The zird flew, matching its pace to his slow trot.

Alan's resolution began to weaken.

Then a figure loomed up beside him in the gloom, a human hand was laid on his arm and a female voice said:

"I thought we'd never get another from Wiln Castle. Step it up a little, fellow. We've a long way to travel before dawn."

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III

They traveled at a fast trot all that night, the zird leading the way like a giant firefly. By the time dawn grayed the eastern sky, they were in the mountains west of Falklyn, and climbing.

When Alan was first able to make out details of his nocturnal guide, he thought for a minute she was a huge Hussir. She wore the Hussir loose jacket, open at the front, and the baggy trousers. But there was no tail, and there were no pointed ears. She was a girl, his own age.

She was the first human Alan had ever seen fully clothed. Alan thought she looked rather ridiculous and, at the same time, he was slightly shocked, as by sacrilege.

They entered a high valley through a narrow pass, and slowed to a walk. For the first time since they left the vicinity of Wiln Castle, they were able to talk in other than short, disconnected phrases.

"Who are you, and where are you taking me?" asked Alan. In the cold light of dawn he was beginning to doubt his impetuousness in fleeing the castle.

"My name is Mara," said the girl. "You've heard of the Wild Humans? I'm one of them, and we live in these mountains."

The hair prickled on the back of Alan's neck. He stopped in his tracks, and half turned to flee. Mara caught his arm.

"Why do all you slaves believe those fairy tales about cannibalism?" she asked scornfully. The word *cannibalism* was unfamiliar to Alan. "We aren't going to eat you, boy, we're going to make you free. What's your name?"

"Alan," he answered in a shaky voice, allowing himself to be led onward. "What is this freedom the zird was talking about?"

"You'll find out," she promised. "But the zird doesn't know. Zirds are just flying animals. We train them to say that one sentence and lead slaves to us."

"Why don't you just come in the fields yourselves?" he asked curiously, his fear dissipating. "You could climb the fences easily."

"That's been tried. The silly slaves just raise a clamor when they recognize a stranger. The Hussirs have caught several of us that way."

The two suns rose, first the blue one, the white one only a few minutes later. The mountains around them awoke with light.

In the dawn, he had thought Mara was dark, but her hair was tawny gold in the pearly morning. Her eyes were deep brown, like the fruit of the ttornot tree.

They stopped by a spring that gushed from between huge rocks, and Mara took the opportunity to appraise his slender, well-knit frame.

"You'll do," she said. "I wish all of them we get were as healthy."

In three weeks, Alan could not have been distinguished from the

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other Wild Humans — outwardly. He was getting used to wearing clothing and, somewhat awkwardly, carried the bow and arrows with which he was armed. He and Mara were ranging several miles from the caves in which the Wild Humans lived.

They were hunting animals for food, and Alan licked his lips in anticipation. He liked cooked meat. The Hussirs fed their human herds bean meal and scraps from the kitchens. The only meat he had ever eaten was raw meat from small animals he had been swift enough to catch in the fields.

They came up on a ridge and Mara, ahead of him, stopped. He came up beside her.

Not far below them, a Hussir moved, afoot, carrying a short, heavy bow and a quiver of arrows. The Hussir looked from side to side, as if hunting, but did not catch sight of them.

A quiver of fear ran through Alan. In that instant, he was a disobedient member of the herd, and death awaited him for his escape from the fields.

There was a sharp twang beside him, and the Hussir stumbled and fell, transfixed through the chest with an arrow. Mara calmly lowered her bow, and smiled at the fright in his eyes.

"There's one that won't find Haafin," she said. "Haafin" was what the Wild Humans called their community.

"The — there are Hussirs in the mountains?" he quavered.

"A few. Hunters. If we get them before they run across the valley, we're all right. Some have seen us and gotten away, though. Haafin has been moved a dozen times in the last century, and we've always lost a lot of people fighting our way out. Those little devils attack in force."

"But what's the good of all this, then?" he asked hopelessly. "There aren't more than four or five hundred humans in Haafin. What good is hiding, and running somewhere else when the Hussirs find you, when sooner or later there'll come a time when they'll wipe you out?"

Mara sat down on a rock.

"You learn fast," she remarked. "You'll probably be surprised to learn that this community has managed to hang on in these mountains for more than a thousand years, but you've still put your finger right on the problem that has faced us for generations."

She hesitated and traced a pattern thoughtfully in the dust with a moccasined foot.

"It's a little early for you to be told, but you might as well start keeping your ears open," she said. "When you've been here a year, you'll be accepted as a member of the community. The way that's done is for you to have an interview with The Refugee, the leader of our people, and he always asks newcomers for their ideas on the solution of that very problem."

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"But what will I listen for?" asked Alan anxiously.

"There are two different major ideas on how to solve the problem, and I'll let you hear them from the people who believe in them," she said. "Just remember what the problem is: to save ourselves from death and the hundreds of thousands of other humans in the world from slavery, we have to find a way to force the Hussirs to accept humans as equals, not as animals."

Many things about Alan's new life in Haafin were not too different from the existence he had known. He had to do his share of work in the little fields that clung to the edges of the small river in the middle of the valley. He had to help hunt animals for meat, he had to help make tools such as the Hussirs used. He had to fight with his fists, on occasion, to protect his rights.

But this thing the Wild Humans called "freedom" was a strange element that touched everything they were and did. The word meant basically, Alan found, that the Wild Humans did not belong to the Hussirs, but were their own masters. When orders were given, they usually had to be obeyed, but they came from humans, not Hussirs.

There were other differences. There were no formal family relationships, for there were no social traditions behind people who for generations had been nothing more than domestic animals. But the pressure and deprivations of rigidly enforced mating seasons were missing, and some of the older couples were mated permanently.

"Freedom," Alan decided, meant a dignity which made a human the equal of a Hussir.

The anniversary of that night when Alan followed the zird came, and Mara led him early in the morning to the extreme end of the valley. She left him at the mouth of a small cave, from which presently emerged the man of whom Alan had heard much but whom he saw now for the first time.

The Refugee's hair and beard were gray, and his face was lined with years.

"You are Alan, who came to us from Wiln Castle," said the old man.

"That is true, your greatness," replied Alan respectfully.

"Don't call me 'your greatness.' That's slave talk. I am Roand, The Refugee."

"Yes, sir."

"When you leave me today, you will be a member of the community of Haafin, only free human community in the world," said Roand. "You will have a member's rights. No man may take a woman from you without her consent. No one may take from you the food you hunt or grow without your consent. If you are first in an empty cave, no one may move into it with you unless you give permission. That is freedom.

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"But, as you were no doubt told long ago, you must offer your best idea on how to make all humans free."

"Sir —" began Alan.

"Before you express yourself," interrupted Roand, "I'm going to give you some help. Come into the cave."

Alan followed him inside. By the light of a torch, Roand showed him a series of diagrams drawn on one wall with soft stone, as one would draw things in the dust with a stick.

"These are maps, Alan," said Roand, and he explained to the boy what a map was. At least, Alan nodded in comprehension.

"You know by now that there are two ways of thinking about what to do to set all humans free, but you do not entirely understand either of them," said Roand. "These maps show you the first one, which was conceived a hundred and fifty years ago but which our people have not been able to agree to try.

"This map shows how, by a surprise attack, we could take Falklyn, the central city of all this Hussir region, although the Hussirs in Falklyn number almost ten thousand. Holding Falklyn, we could free the nearly forty thousand humans in the city and we would have enough strength then to take the surrounding area and strike at the cities around it, gradually, as these other maps show."

Alan nodded.

"But I like the other way better," Alan said. "There must be a reason why they won't let humans enter the Star Tower."

Roand's toothless smile did not mar the innate dignity of his face.

"You are a mystic, as I am, young Alan," he said. "But the tradition says that for a human to enter the Star Tower is not enough. Let me tell you of the tradition.

"The tradition says that the Star Tower was once the home of all humans. There were only a dozen or so humans then, but they had powers that were great and strange. But when they came out of the Star Tower, the Hussirs were able to enslave them through mere force of numbers.

"Three of those first humans escaped to these mountains and became the first Wild Humans. From them has come the tradition that has passed to their descendants and to the humans who have been rescued from Hussir slavery.

"The tradition says that a human who enters the Star Tower can free all the humans in the world — if he takes with him the Silk and the Song."

Roand reached into a crevice.

"This is the Silk," he said, drawing forth a peach-colored scarf on which something had been painted. Alan recognized it as writing, such as the Hussirs used and were rumored to have been taught by humans. Roand read it to him, reverently.

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" 'REG. B-XII. CULTURE V. SOS.' "

"What does it mean?" asked Alan.

"No one knows," said Roand. "It is a great mystery. It may be a magical incantation."

He put the Silk back into the crevice.

"This is the only other writing we have handed down by our forebears," said Roand, and pulled out a fragment of very thin, brittle, yellowish material. To Alan it looked something like thin cloth that had hardened with age, yet it had a different texture. Roand handled it very carefully.

"This was torn and the rest of it lost centuries ago," said Roand, and he read. " '*October 3, 2 . . . ours to be the last . . . three lost expeditions . . . too far to keep trying . . . how we can get . . .*' "

Alan could make no more sense of this than he could of the words of the Silk.

"What is the Song?" asked Alan.

"Every human knows it from childhood," said Roand. "It is the best known of all human songs."

" '*Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,*' " quoted Alan at once, " '*I can reach you, though you're far. . . .*' "

"That's right, but there is a second verse that only the Wild Humans know. You must learn it. It goes like this.

"*Twinkle, twinkle, little bug,*
Long and round, of shiny hue.
In a room marked by a cross,
Sting my arm when I've found you.
Lay me down, in bed so deep,
And then there's naught to do but sleep."

"It doesn't make sense," said Alan. "No more than the first verse — though Mara showed me what a turtle looks like."

"They aren't supposed to make sense until you sing them in the Star Tower," said Roand, "and then only if you have the Silk with you."

Alan cogitated a while. Roand was silent, waiting.

"Some of the people want one human to try to reach the Star Tower and think that will make all humans miraculously free," said Alan at last. "The others think that is but a child's tale and we must conquer the Hussirs with bows and spears. It seems to me, sir, that one or the other must be tried. I'm sorry that I don't know enough to suggest another course."

Roand's face fell.

"So you will join one side or the other and argue about it for the rest of your life," he said sadly. "And nothing will ever be done, because the people can't agree."

"I don't see why that has to be, sir."

Roand looked at him with sudden hope.

"What do you mean?"

"Can't you or someone else order them to take one course or another?"

Roand shook his head.

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"Here there are rules, but no man tells another what to do," he said. "We are free here."

"Sir, when I was a small child, we played a game called Two Herds," said Alan slowly. "The sides would be divided evenly, each with a tree for a haven. When two of opposite sides met in the field, the one last from his haven captured the other and took him back to join his side."

"I've played that game, many years ago," said Roand. "I don't see your point, boy."

"Well, sir, to win, one side had to capture all the people on the other side. But, with so many captures back and forth, sometimes night fell and the game was not ended. So we always played that, then, the side with the most children when the game ended was the winning side.

"Why couldn't it be done that way?"

Comprehension dawned slowly in Roand's face. There was something there, too, of the awe-inspiring revelation that he was present at the birth of a major advance in the science of human government.

"Let them count those for each proposal, eh, and agree to abide by the proposal having the majority support?"

"Yes, sir."

Roand grinned his toothless grin.

"You have indeed brought us a new idea, my boy, but you and I will have to surrender our own viewpoint by it, I'm afraid. I keep close count. There are a few more people in Haafin who think we should attack the Hussirs with weapons than believe in the old tradition."

IV

When the armed mob of Wild Humans approached Falklyn in the dusk, Alan wore the Silk around his neck. Roand, one of the oldsters who stayed behind at Haafin, had given it to him.

"When Falklyn is taken my boy, take the Silk with you into the Star Tower and sing the Song," were Roand's parting words. "There may be something to the old traditions after all."

After much argument among those Wild Humans who had given it thought for years, a military plan had emerged blessed with all the simplicity of a non-military race. They would just march into the city, killing all Hussirs they saw, and stay there, still killing all Hussirs they saw. Their own strength would increase gradually as they freed the city's enslaved humans. No one could put a definite finger on anything wrong with the idea.

Falklyn was built like a wheel. Around the park in which stood the Star Tower, the streets ran in concentric circles. Like spokes of the wheel, other streets struck from the park out to the edge of the city.

Without any sort of formation, the humans entered one of these spoke-streets and moved inward, a few adventurous souls breaking away from the main body at each

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cross street. It was suppertime in Falklyn, and few Hussirs were abroad. The humans were jubilant as those who escaped their arrows fled, whistling in fright.

They were about a third of the way to the center of Falklyn when the bells began ringing, first near at hand and then all over the city. Hussirs popped out of doors and onto balconies, and arrows began to sail in among the humans to match their own. The motley army began to break up as its soldiers sought cover. Its progress was slowed, and there was some hand-to-hand fighting.

Alan found himself with Mara, crouching in a doorway. Ahead of them and behind them, Wild Humans scurried from house to house, still moving forward. An occasional Hussir hopped hastily across the street, sometimes making it, sometimes falling from a human arrow.

"This doesn't look so good," said Alan. "Nobody seemed to think of the Hussirs being prepared for an attack, but those bells must have been an alarm system."

"We're still moving ahead," replied Mara confidently.

Alan shook his head.

"That may just mean we'll have more trouble getting out of the city," he said. "The Hussirs outnumber us twenty to one, and they're killing more of us than we're killing of them."

The door beside them opened and a Hussir leaped all the way out before seeing them. Alan dispatched him with a blow from his spear. Mara at his heels, he ran forward to the next doorway. Shouts of humans and whistles and cries of Hussirs echoed back and forth down the street.

The fighting humans were perhaps halfway to the Star Tower when from ahead of them came the sound of shouting and chanting. From the dimness it seemed that a solid river of white was pouring toward them, filling the street from wall to wall.

A wild Human across the street from Alan and Mara shouted in triumph.

"They're humans! The slaves are coming to help us!"

A ragged shout went up from the embattled Wild Humans. But as it died down, they were able to distinguish the words of the chanting and the shouting from that naked mass of humanity.

"Kill the Wild Humans! Kill the Wild Humans! Kill the Wild Humans!"

Remembering his own childhood fear of Wild Humans, Alan suddenly understood. With a confidence fully justified, the Hussirs had turned the humans' own people against them.

The invaders looked at each other in alarm, and drew closer together beneath the protection of overhanging balconies. Hussir arrows whistled near them unheeded.

They could not kill their enslaved brothers, and there was no chance of

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breaking through that oncoming avalanche of humanity. First by ones and twos, and then in groups, they turned to retreat from the city.

But the way was blocked. Up the street from the direction in which they had come moved orderly ranks of armed Hussirs.

Some of the Wild Humans, among them Alan and Mara, ran for the nearest cross streets. Along them, too, approached companies of Hussirs.

The Wild Humans were trapped in the middle of Falklyn.

Terrified, the men and women of Haafin converged and swirled in a helpless knot in the center of the street. Hussir arrows from nearby windows picked them off one by one. The advancing Hussirs in the street were almost within bowshot, and the yelling, unarmed slave humans were even closer.

"Your clothes!" shouted Alan, on an inspiration. "Throw away your clothes and weapons! Try to get back to the mountains!"

In almost a single swift shrug, he divested himself of the open jacket and baggy trousers and threw his bow, arrows and spear from him. Only the Silk still fluttered from his neck.

As Mara stood open-mouthed beside him, he jerked at her jacket impatiently. Suddenly getting his idea, she stripped quickly. The other Wild Human began to follow suit.

The arrows of the Hussir squads were beginning to fall among them. Grabbing Mara's hand, Alan plunged headlong toward the avalanche of slave humans.

Slowed as he was by Mara, a dozen other Wild Humans raced ahead of him to break into the wall of humanity. Angry hands clutched at them as they tried to lose themselves among the slaves, and Alan and Mara, clinging to each other, were engulfed in a sudden swirl of shouting confusion.

There were naked, sweating bodies moving on all sides of them. They were buffeted back and forth like chips in the surf. Desperately, they gripped hands and stayed close together.

They were crowded to one side of the street, against the wall. The human tide scraped them along the rough stone and battered them roughly into a doorway. The door yielded to the tremendous pressure and flew inward. Somehow, only the two of them lost their balance and sprawled on the carpeted floor inside.

A Hussir appeared from an inside door, a barbed spear upraised.

"Mercy, your greatmess!" cried Alan in the Hussir tongue, groveling.

The Hussir lowered the spear.

"Who is your master, human?" he demanded.

A distant memory thrust itself into Alan's mind, haltingly.

"My master lives in Northwesttown, your greatness."

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The spear moved in the Hussir's hand.

"This is Northwesttown, human," he said ominously.

"Yes, your greatness," whimpered Alan, and prayed for no more coincidences. "I belong to the merchant, Senk."

The spear point dropped to the floor again.

"I felt sure you were a town human," said the Hussir, his eyes on the scarf around Alan's neck. "I know Senk well. And you, woman, who is your master?"

Alan did not wait to find out whether Mara spoke Hussir.

"She also belongs to my lord Senk, your greatness." Another recollection came to his aid, and he added, "It's mating season, your greatness."

The Hussir gave the peculiar whistle that served for a laugh among his race. He beckoned to them to rise.

"Go out the back door and return to your pen," he said kindly. "You're lucky you weren't separated from each other in that herd."

Gratefully, Alan and Mara slipped out the back door and made their way up a dark alley to a street. He led her to the left.

"We'll have to find a cross street to get out of Falklyn," he said. "This is one of the circular streets."

"I hope most of the others escape," she said fervently. "There's no one left in Haafin but the old people and the small children."

"We'll have to be careful," he said. "They may have guards at the edge of the city. We outtalked that Hussir, but you'd better go ahead of me till we get to the outskirts. It'll look less suspicious if we're not together."

At the cross street, they turned right. Mara moved ahead about thirty feet, and he followed. He watched her slim white figure swaying under the flickering gas lights of Falklyn and, suddenly, he laughed quietly. The memory of the blonde girl at Wiln Castle had returned to him, and it occurred to him, too, that he had never missed her.

The streets were nearly empty. Once or twice a human crossed ahead of them at a trot, and several times Hussirs passed them. For a while Alan heard shouting and whistling not far away, then these sounds faded.

They had not been walking long when Mara stopped. Alan came up beside her.

"We must have reached the outskirts," she said, waving her hand at the open space ahead of them.

They walked quickly.

But there was something wrong. The cross street just ahead curved too much, and there was the glimmer of lights some distance beyond it.

"We took the wrong turn when we left the alley," said Alan miserably. "Look — straight ahead!"

Dimly against the stars loomed the dark bulk of the Star Tower.

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V

The great metal building stretched up into the night sky, losing itself in the blackness. The park around it was unlighted, but they could see the glow of the lamps at the Star Tower's entrance, where the Hussir guards remained on duty.

"We'll have to turn back," said Alan dully.

She stood close to him and looked up at him with large eyes.

"All the way back through the city?" There was a tremor in her voice.

"I'm afraid so." He put his arm around her shoulders and they turned away from the Star Tower. He fumbled at his scarf as they walked slowly back down the street.

His scarf! He stopped, halting her with a jerk. The Silk!

He grasped her shoulders with both hands and looked down into her face.

"Mara," he said soberly, "we aren't going back to the mountains. We aren't going back out of the city. We're going into the Star Tower!"

They retraced their steps to the end of the spoke-street. They raced across the last and smallest of the circular streets, vaulted the rail slipped like wraiths into the shadows of the park.

They moved from bush to bush and from tree to tree with the quiet facility of creatures born to nights in the open air. Little knots of guards were scattered all over the park. Probably the guard had been strengthened because of the Wild Human invasion of Falklyn. But the guards all had small, shaded lights, and Hussirs could not see well in the dark. The two humans were able to avoid them easily.

They came up behind the Star Tower and circled it cautiously. At its base, the entrance ramp was twice Alan's height. There were two guards, talking in low tones under the lamps that hung on each side of the dark, open door to the tower.

"If we could only have brought a bow!" exclaimed Alan in a whisper. "I could handle one of them without a weapon, but not two."

"Couldn't both of us?" she whispered back.

"No! They're little, but they're strong. Much stronger than a woman."

Against the glow of the light, something projected a few inches over the edge of the ramp above them.

"Maybe it's a spear," whispered Alan. "I'll lift you up."

In a moment she was down again, the object in her hands.

"Just an arrow," she muttered in disgust. "What good is it without a bow?"

"It may be enough," he said. "You stay here, and when I get to the foot of the ramp, make a noise to distract them. Then run for it —"

He crept on his stomach to the

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point where the ramp angled to the ground. He looked back. Mara was a lightness against the blackness of the corner.

Mara began banging against the side of the ramp with her fists and chanting in a low tone. Grabbing their bows, both Hussir guards moved quickly to the edge. Alan stood up and ran as fast as he could up the ramp, the arrow in his hand.

Their bows were drawn to shoot down where Mara was, when they felt the vibration of the ramp. They turned quickly.

Their arrows, hurriedly loosed, missed him. He plunged his own arrow through the throat of one and grappled with the other. In a savage burst of strength, he hurled the Hussir over the side to the ground below.

Mara cried out. A patrol of three Hussirs had been too close. She nearly reached the foot of the ramp, when one of them plunged from the darkness and locked his arms around her hips from behind. The other two were hopping up the ramp toward Alan, spears in hand.

Alan snatched up the bow and quiver of the Hussir he had slain. His first arrow took one of the approaching Hussirs, halfway down the ramp. The Hussir that had seized Mara hurled her away from him to the ground and raised his spear for the kill.

Alan's arrow only grazed the creature, but it dropped the spear, and Mara fled up the ramp.

The third Hussir lurched at Alan behind its spear. Alan dodged. The blade missed him, but the haft burned his side, almost knocking him from the ramp. The Hussir recovered like lightning, poised the spear again. It was too close for Alan to use the bow, and he had no time to pick up a spear.

Mara leaped on the Hussir's back, locking her legs around its body and grappling its spear arm with both her hands. Before it could shake her off, Alan wrested the spear from the Hussir's hand and dispatched it.

The other guards were coming up from all directions. Arrows rang against the sides of the Star Tower as the two humans ducked inside.

There was a light inside the Star Tower, a softer light than the gas lamps but more effective. They were inside a small chamber, from which another door led to the interior of the tower.

The door, swung back against the wall on its hinges, was two feet thick and its diameter was greater than the height of a man. Both of them together were unable to move it.

Arrows were coming through the door. Alan had left the guards' weapons outside. In a moment the Hussirs would gain courage to rush the ramp.

Alan looked around in desperation for a weapon. The metal walls were bare except for some hand-

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rails and a panel from which projected three metal sticks. Alan wrenched at one, trying to pull it loose for a club. It pulled down and there was a hissing sound in the room, but it would not come loose. He tried a second, and again it swung down but stayed fast to the wall.

Mara shrieked behind him, and he whirled.

The big door was closing, by itself, slowly, and outside the ramp was raising itself from the ground and sliding into the wall of the Star Tower below them. The few Hussirs who had ventured onto the end of the ramp were falling from it to the ground, like ants.

The door closed with a clang of finality. The hissing in the room went on for a moment, then stopped. It was as still as death in the Star Tower.

They went through the inner door, timidly, holding hands. They were in a curved corridor. The other side of the corridor was a blank wall. They followed the corridor all the way around the Star Tower, back to the door, without finding an entrance through that inner wall.

But there was a ladder that went upward. They climbed it, Alan first, then Mara. They were in another corridor, and another ladder went upward.

Up and up they climbed, past level after level. The blank inner wall gave way to spacious rooms, in which was strange furniture. Some were compartmented, and on the compartment doors for three levels, red crosses were painted.

Both of them were bathed with perspiration when they reached the room with the windows. And here there were no more ladders.

"Mara, we're at the top of the Star Tower!" exclaimed Alan.

The room was domed, and from head level all the dome was windows. But, though the windows faced upward, those around the lower periphery showed the lighted city of Falklyn spread below them. There was even one of them that showed a section of the park, and the park was right under them, but they knew it was the park because they could see the Hussirs scurrying about in the light of the two gas lamps that still burned beside the closed door of the Star Tower.

All the windows in the upper part of the dome opened on the stars.

The lower part of the walls was covered with strange wheels and metal sticks and diagrams and little shining circles and colored lights.

"We're in the top of the Star Tower!" shouted Alan in a triumphant frenzy. "I have the Silk and I shall sing the Song!"

VI

Alan raised his voice and the words reverberated back at them from the walls of the domed chamber.

"*Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,*
I can reach you, though you're far.

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Shut my mouth and find my head,
Find a worm that's striped with red,
Feed it to the turtle shell,
Then go to sleep, for all is well."

Nothing happened.

Alan sang the second verse, and still nothing happened.

"Do you suppose that if we went back out now the Hussirs would let all humans go free?" asked Mara doubtfully.

"That's silly," he said, staring at the window where an increasing number of Hussirs was crowding into the park. "It's a riddle. We have to do what it says."

"But how can we? What does it mean?"

"It has something to do with the Star Tower," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe the '*golden star*' means the Star Tower, though I always thought it meant the Golden Star in the southern sky. Anyway, we've reached the Star Tower, and it's silly to think about reaching a real star.

"Let's take the next line. '*Shut my mouth and find my head.*' How can you shut anyone's mouth before you find their head?"

"We had to shut the door to the Star Tower before we could climb to the top," she ventured.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "Now, let's *find a worm that's striped with red*'!"

They looked all over the big room, in and under the strange crooked beds that would tilt forward to make chairs, behind the big, queer-looking objects that stood all over the floor. The bottom part of the walls had drawers and they pulled these out, one by one.

At last Mara dropped a little disc of metal and it popped in half on the floor. A flat spool fell out, and white tape unrolled from it in a tangle.

"Worm!" shouted Alan. "Find one striped with red!"

They popped open disc after metal disc — and there it was: a tape crossed diagonally with red stripes. There was lettering on the metal discs and Mara spelled out the letters on this one.

"EMERGENCY. TERRA. AUTOMATIC BLASTDOWN."

Neither of them could figure out what that meant. So they looked for the "*turtle shell*," and of course that would be the transparent dome-shaped object that sat on a pedestal between two of the chair-beds.

It was an awkward job trying to feed the striped worm to the turtle shell, for the only opening in the turtle shell was under it and to one side. But with Alan lying in one cushioned chair-bed and Mara lying in the other, and the two of them working together, they got the end of the worm into the turtle shell's mouth.

Immediately the turtle shell began eating the striped worm with a clicking chatter that lasted only a moment before it was drowned in a great rumbling roar from far down in the bowels of the Star Tower.

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Then the windows that looked down on the park blossomed into flame that was almost too bright for human eyes to bear, and the lights of Falklyn began to fall away in the other windows around the rim of the dome. There was a great pressure that pushed them mightily down into the cushions on which they lay, and forced their senses from them.

Many months later, they would remember the second verse of the song. They would go into one of the chambers marked with a cross, they would sting themselves with the bugs that were hypodermic needles and sink down in the sleep of suspended animation.

But now they lay, naked and unconscious, in the control room of the accelerating starship. In the breeze from the air conditioners, the silken message to Earth fluttered pink against Alan's throat.

I Want My Name in the Title

I, who am No-Thing,
Was quickened by the megavolts
And broke through the dungeon bolts,
Quivering with loathing.

I lurk by the sign:
"Twenty kilometers to Castle Frankenstein."

Counts Dracula and King Kongs throng the theater,
But I am "the monster," nameless and annoyed,
Seeking my creator
Like any humanoid.

WINONA McCLINTIC

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An editor owes it to his readers, as well as to himself, to run an occasional story simply because he loves it. Devote too much thought to what percentage of readers will like which stories and why, and you'll wind up with (what one of our competitors incredibly boasts of publishing) a magazine of purely machine-made fiction. So I'll admit that I've known people whom The Club Secretary *left cold; but it is one of my own all-time favorites, even among the tales of Lord Dunsany, and here it is.*

The Club Secretary

by LORD DUNSANY

I THINK I HAVE SAID THAT IT IS THE custom in our Club to discuss gardening during the spring and summer, or rather to hear the tales of what various members have been doing in their gardens, or of any wonderful growth that has come unwontedly early or incredibly large in the garden of any one of us; but when the season of fogs returns, and the sun sets behind houses before the middle of luncheon, it is rather our custom to tell tales of brighter scenes, to keep our little crescent before the fire from falling asleep, or from drifting away one by one to toy with some tedious business. It was upon such an occasion as this that one of our group in his chair before the fire, who seemed about to be falling asleep, suddenly opened his eyes wide and exclaimed: "For the Lord's sake someone tell us of somewhere where there is sunlight."

And I heard Jorkens draw in a breath. But, before he had time to speak, the voice of Terbut was raised. "And let's hear of England this time," he said. "I'm tired of the ends of the earth."

A more deliberate attempt to put Jorkens out of his stride I have seldom heard. But it had no effect. "I saw a curious thing once in England," Jorkens said; "a very curious thing. I was taking a walk out of London once — a long walk with sandwiches, and a good flask, one that would hold a pint. Partly I went for exercise, but it was more to please the spirit than the body that I went. I had somehow got tired of pavements. You know how one feels then; and Spring was coming on with a rush. I don't know what way I went, only that it must have been roughly southwards, for the sun was shining in my eyes.

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"I started early and had no lunch until some time after two, for I would not sit down and eat till I was completely clear of London. I must have done a good twenty miles. I sat myself down on a bank of grass by the road, with a hedge in front of me as green as a meteor, along the top of a bank on the opposite side. Primroses were out on the bank, and early violets. There I ate my lunch, with birds singing, and white clouds scurrying over the dome of a blue sky. What was the other side of the hedge on the bank I had no idea: I could see neither through nor over. I sat there wondering comfortably all through my lunch. And after lunch my long walk, the bright sun, birds singing, and one thing and another, were bringing a drowsiness on me, when a sudden bout of curiosity made me leap up and cross the road, and look for a gap in the hedge. Through a gap low down among the stems of the thorn I saw smooth lawns stretching away, and a little house with bow windows and bottle-glass panes and red roof, that was clearly the house of a golf club. And looking at it through the hedge never soothed my curiosity, for the light of Spring was hanging so strongly over those lawns that they somehow seemed to have the glow of lawns seen long ago in the early morning and remembered almost from infancy; there seemed something as magical about them as that.

"I was a lot slenderer in those days, and once I got my head through the gap in the hedge it was only a matter of wriggling. No one was playing golf, and I walked up to the clubhouse with not a soul in sight, and no sound of anyone stirring. Grass of Parnassus was flowering in such abundance that I wondered if those smooth lawns were not too marshy for golf. I came all in the silence to the oaken door of the golf club. And there a hall-porter, glittering with livery that was out of date in its splendour, opened the door at once. I had then to apologize and explain I was lost; and, thinking to put a better face on it to an official of the club than to the hall-porter, or at any rate hoping to gain time, I asked to see the secretary. Well, the secretary was in the little clubhouse, and the hall-porter brought him at once.

" 'What can I do for you?' he said, all amiability.

" 'I wanted to apologize,' I said. 'I am not a member of your golf club. I lost my way on your links.'

"He smiled away my apology. 'It's not a golf club,' he said.

" 'Not?' said I.

" 'No,' he replied airily. Why did I say 'airily'? He seemed to me airy. He seemed volatile, energetic, even for a club secretary. 'No, not a golf club,' he said.

" 'I quite thought it was a golf club,' said I.

" 'No,' he replied. 'It's a club, as a matter of fact, for poets.'

" 'For poets?' I said.

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" 'Yes,' said the secretary, 'and, what may quite surprise you, for the poets of all time.'

" 'Of all time?' I said.

" 'Yes,' he repeated, and, beckoning me forward to the inner doors of the hall, he pointed through its glass panes. 'There you see Swinburne,' he said, 'talking to Herrick.'

"And sure enough I recognized the earnest face of Swinburne talking, and saw the man that the secretary told me was Herrick giving little answering chuckles. And somehow, in spite of what the secretary had said, it didn't surprise me at all; there was something so fairy-like in the light on the lawns before I got to the club, and something so far from this age in the little house, that it seemed only natural that it had gathered up from the ages what was lost to other lawns. I should not have been surprised to see Homer himself. And sure enough there he stood, stroking his beard, eyes full of thought, giving me somehow the impression of a most tremendous Tory.

" 'And there's Stephen Phillips,' he said, 'talking to Dante.'

"And I recognized the two men, and seemed to see, through the rather dim glass of the door, a certain resemblance of feature.

" 'A bit lucky, wasn't he, getting elected?' I said, pointing to Phillips.

" 'Well, yes,' said the secretary, 'but you have luck in all clubs — there's always somebody who may be just not quite.'

"And then Tennyson went by, on the other side of the shimmering glass. I recognized him immediately.

" 'He's having a bit of a slump over there,' I said, pointing over the lawns to the way by which I had come.

" 'Oh, he's all right here,' said the secretary.

" 'And the waiters?' I said, for they were passing to and fro.

" 'All writers too,' he said. 'All wrote good stuff. But not immortal. He's the best we have on our staff,' he said, pointing to the hall-porter. 'That's Pope.'

" 'Pope,' I said. 'Is it really? I suppose your standard of membership . . .'

" 'Pretty high,' he said. 'You see, we have Shakespeare, Milton, and all of them. There goes Shelley.'

"And sure enough I saw a light figure slipping by, to drop what looked like a political pamphlet unnoticed in somebody's hat.

" 'And the name of the club?' I asked.

" 'The Elysian Club,' he said.

"Somehow I had thought so.

"Pope only hall-porter, Homer himself a member. Who, then, was the secretary? That was the question which in this extraordinary club, where I might have found so much of overpowering interest, became the one thought that absorbed me. What a power is curiosity, when once awakened! I might have heard Shakespeare speak. And yet I wasted my time in trying to satisfy my

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miserable curiosity as to who the secretary was. 'Of course you write yourself,' I said.

" 'Very little,' he answered; 'I gave it up long ago.'

"Gave it up! That was even more baffling than ever. Yet greater than Pope, whoever he was. Was he Keats? I thought for a moment. For Keats perhaps wrote little compared to some of them. But no, Keats never gave it up.

"There was nothing for it but to ask him his name. Which I did. And he told me. And, do you know, it conveyed to me nothing whatever. And that was awkward. It left me saying, 'Yes, yes, of course,' and remarks like that, too transparent not to be seen through. But he took no offence. 'No, no, you wouldn't have heard of me,' he said. 'I never wrote enough. One great line — that's what the members say. If I had written thirty I could have been a member myself. But only one great line, they say. Better than that fellow, you know,' he said, pointing to the hall-porter. 'Yet not enough for full membership. But I *am* an honorary member.'

"Well, I've read a good deal of poetry, knocking about the world, and the line might convey something where the name never could. And sure enough it did. I asked him if he would mind repeating the line to me; and he began at once. 'A rose-red,' he began, but I got the rest of it in before he had time to. . . . 'city half as old as time,' said I.

" 'Yes,' he said. 'A rose-red city half as old as time,' repeating the beautiful line like a good host relishing a taste of his century-old port. 'It's a pity I couldn't have made thirty of them; but I am really very comfortable as I am. Would you like to see my office?'

"Well, he showed me into a very snug little room, and I should have liked to stop and talk with him, and especially to see more of the members; but, after all, I had forced my way into the club, and had taken up quite enough of his time already. So I offered him my pint flask, which of course I had filled with whisky, as some slight return for his trouble. And, do you know, he drank up every drop of it. When I opened it for a drop for myself when I got back to the road, I found it was quite empty."

Many years ago, when I first read this story, I was left tantalized, desperately wondering what was *the secretary's name — though the one line left me with no doubts as to his eligibility. In case you're in the same state: The secretary is John William Burgon (1813–1888), whose Newdigate Prize Poem in 1845,* Petra, *includes the couplet*

> Match me such marvel save in Eastern clime,
> A rose-red city half as old as time.

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The Guest of Honor at the 14th World Science Fiction Convention, to be held in New York at the Biltmore over the Labor Day weekend of August 31-September 3, will be Arthur C. Clarke; and I doubt that any convention committee's selection — even such unarguable choices as Campbell, Gernsback or Heinlein — has more thoroughly deserved the honor. One of the advantages of early membership in the Convention (you can register now by sending $2 to Box 272, Radio City Station, New York 19) is that you receive the progress reports, in the first of which you'll find a most stimulating analytic "appreciation" of Clarke by James Blish. One minor point that Blish overlooks is Clarke's propensity, in intervals between his labors in serious fiction and fact, for simply amusing himself (and us). If — as I trust is the case — you've recently read the magnificent THE CITY AND THE STARS *(which would in itself justify the Convention's laurels), you may be surprised to turn to so deft a light exercise in irony as this Clarke story, which has never appeared on the newsstands before.*

No Morning After

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

"BUT THIS IS TERRIBLE!" SAID THE Supreme Scientist. "Surely there is *something* we can do!"

"Yes, Your Cognizance, but it will be extremely difficult. The planet is more than five hundred light-years away, and it is very hard to maintain contact. However, we believe we can establish a bridgehead. Unfortunately, that is not the only problem. So far, we have been quite unable to communicate with these beings. Their telepathic powers are exceedingly rudimentary — perhaps even non-existent. And if we cannot talk to them, there is no way in which we can help."

There was a long mental silence while the Supreme Scientist analyzed the situation and arrived, as he always did, at the correct answer.

"Any intelligent race must have *some* telepathic individuals," he mused. "We must send out hundreds of observers, tuned to catch the first hint of stray thought. When you find a single responsive mind, concentrate all your efforts

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upon it. We *must* get our message through."

"Very good, Your Cognizance. It shall be done."

Across the abyss, across the gulf which light itself took half a thousand years to span, the questing intellects of the planet Thaar sent out their tendrils of thought, searching desperately for a single human being whose mind could perceive their presence. And as luck would have it, they encountered William Cross.

At least, they thought it was luck at the time, though later they were not so sure. In any case, they had little choice. The combination of circumstances which opened Bill's mind to them lasted only for seconds, and was not likely to occur again this side of eternity.

There were three ingredients to the miracle: it is hard to say if one was more important than another. The first was the accident of position. A flask of water, when sunlight falls upon it, can act as a crude lens, concentrating the light into a small area. On an immeasurably larger scale, the dense core of the Earth was converging the waves that came from Thaar. In the ordinary way, the radiations of thought are unaffected by matter — they pass through it as effortlessly as light through glass. But there is rather a lot of matter in a planet, and the whole Earth was acting as a gigantic lens. As it turned, it was carrying Bill through its focus, where the feeble thought-impulses from Thaar were concentrated a hundredfold.

Yet millions of other men were equally well placed: they received no message. But they were not rocket engineers: they had not spent years thinking and dreaming of space, until it had become part of their very being.

And they were not, as Bill was, blind drunk, teetering on the last knife-edge of consciousness, trying to escape from reality into the world of dreams, where there were no disappointments and setbacks.

Of course, he could see the Army's point of view. "You are paid, Dr. Cross," General Potter had pointed out with unnecessary emphasis, "to design missiles, *not*— ah—spaceships. What you do in your spare time is your own concern, but I must ask you not to use the facilities of the establishment for your hobby. From now on, all projects for the computing section will have to be cleared by me. That is all."

They couldn't sack him, of course: he was too important. But he was not sure that he wanted to stay. He was not really sure of anything except that the job had backfired on him, and that Brenda had finally gone off with Johnny Gardner — putting events in their order of importance.

Wavering slightly, Bill cupped his chin in his hands and stared at the whitewashed brick wall on the other side of the table. The only attempt at ornamentation was a calendar from Lockheed and a glossy six by

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eight from Aerojet showing Li'l Abner Mark I making a boosted takeoff. Bill gazed morosely at a spot midway between the two pictures, and emptied his mind of thought. The barriers went down. . . .

At that moment, the massed intellects of Thaar gave a soundless cry of triumph, and the wall in front of Bill slowly dissolved into a swirling mist. He appeared to be looking down a tunnel that stretched to infinity. As a matter of fact, he was.

Bill studied the phenomenon with mild interest. It had a certain novelty, but was not up to the standard of previous hallucinations. And when the voice started to speak in his mind, he let it ramble on for some time before he did anything about it. Even when drunk, he had an old-fashioned prejudice against starting conversations with himself.

"Bill," the voice began. "Listen carefully. We have had great difficulty in contacting you, and this is extremely important."

Bill doubted this on general principles. *Nothing* was important any more.

"We are speaking to you from a very distant planet," continued the voice in a tone of urgent friendliness. "You are the only human being we have been able to contact, so you *must* understand what we are saying."

Bill felt mildly worried, though in an impersonal sort of way, since it was now rather hard to focus onto his own problems. How serious was it, he wondered, when you started to hear voices? Well, it was best not to get excited. You can take it or leave it, Dr. Cross, he told himself. Let's take it until it gets a nuisance.

"OK," he answered with bored indifference. "Go right ahead and talk to me. I won't mind as long as it's interesting."

There was a pause. Then the voice continued, in a slightly worried fashion.

"We don't quite understand. Our message isn't merely *interesting*. It's vital to your entire race, and you must notify your government immediately."

"I'm waiting," said Bill. "It helps to pass the time."

Five hundred light-years away, the Thaarns conferred hastily among themselves. Something seemed to be wrong, but they could not decide precisely what. There was no doubt that they had established contact, yet this was not the sort of reaction they had expected. Well, they could only proceed and hope for the best.

"Listen, Bill," they continued. "Our scientists have just discovered that your sun is about to explode. It will happen three days from now — seventy-four hours, to be exact. Nothing can stop it. But there's no need to be alarmed. We can save you, if you'll do what we say."

"Go on," said Bill. This hallucination was ingenious.

"We can create what we call a bridge — it's a kind of tunnel through space, like the one you're

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looking into now. The theory is far too complicated to explain, even to one of your mathematicians."

"Hold on a minute!" protested Bill. "I am a mathematician, and a darn good one, even when I'm sober. And I've read all about this kind of thing in the science fiction magazines. I presume you're talking about some kind of short cut through a higher dimension of space. That's old stuff — pre-Einstein."

A sensation of distinct surprise seeped into Bill's mind.

"We had no idea you were so advanced scientifically," said the Thaarns. "But we haven't time to talk about the theory. All that matters is this — if you were to step into that opening in front of you, you'd find yourself instantly on another planet. It's a short cut, as you said — in this case, through the thirty-seventh dimension."

"And it leads to your world?"

"Oh no — you couldn't live here. But there are plenty of planets like Earth in the universe, and we've found one that will suit you. We'll establish bridgeheads like this all over Earth, so your people will only have to walk through them to be saved. Of course, they'll have to start building up civilization again when they reach their new homes, but it's their only hope. You have to pass on this message, and tell them what to do."

"I can just see them listening to me," said Bill. "Why don't you go and talk to the President?"

"Because yours was the only mind we were able to contact. Others seemed closed to us: we don't understand why."

"I could tell you," said Bill, looking at the nearly empty bottle in front of him. He was certainly getting his money's worth. What a remarkable thing the human mind was! Of course, there was nothing at all original in this dialogue: it was easy to see where the ideas came from. Only last week he'd been reading a story about the end of the world, and all this wishful thinking about bridges and tunnels through space was pretty obvious compensation for anyone who'd spent five years wrestling with recalcitrant rockets.

"If the sun does blow up," Bill asked abruptly — trying to catch his hallucination unawares — "what would happen?"

"Why, your planet would be melted instantly. All the planets, in fact, right out to Jupiter."

Bill had to admit that this was quite a grandiose conception. He let his mind play with the thought, and the more he considered it, the more he liked it.

"My dear hallucination," he remarked pityingly. "If I believed you, d'you know what I'd say?"

"But you *must* believe us!" came the despairing cry across the light-years.

Bill ignored it. He was warming to his theme.

"I'd tell you this. *It would be the*

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best thing that could possibly happen. Yes, it would save a whole lot of misery. No one would have to worry about the Russians and the atom bomb and the high cost of living. Oh, it would be wonderful! It's just what everybody really wants. Nice of you to come along and tell us, but just you go back home and pull your old bridge after you."

There was consternation on Thaar. The Supreme Scientist's brain, floating like a great mass of coral in its tank of nutrient solution, turned slightly yellow about the edges — something it had not done since the Xantil invasion, five thousand years ago. At least fifteen psychologists had nervous breakdowns and were never the same again. The main computer in the College of Cosmophysics started dividing every number in its memory circuits by zero, and promptly blew all its fuses.

And on Earth, Bill Cross was really hitting his stride.

"Look at *me*," he said, pointing a wavering finger at his chest. "I've spent years trying to make rockets do something useful, and they tell me I'm only allowed to build guided missiles, so that we can all blow each other up. The Sun will make a neater job of it, and if you did give us another planet we'd only start the whole damn thing all over again."

He paused sadly, marshaling his morbid thoughts.

"And now Brenda heads out of town without even leaving a note. So you'll pardon my lack of enthusiasm for your Boy Scout act."

He couldn't have said "enthusiasm" aloud, Bill realized. But he could still think it, which was an interesting scientific discovery. As he got drunker and drunker, would his cogitation — whoops, *that* nearly threw him! — finally drop down to words of one syllable?

In a final despairing exertion, the Thaarns sent their thoughts along the tunnel between the stars.

"You can't really mean it, Bill! Are *all* human beings like you?"

Now that was an interesting philosophical question. Bill considered it carefully — or as carefully as he could in view of the warm, rosy glow that was now beginning to envelop him. After all, things might be worse. He could get another job, if only for the pleasure of telling General Porter what he could do with his three stars. And as for Brenda — well, women were like streetcars: there'd always be another along in a minute.

Best of all, there was a second bottle of whisky in the TOP SECRET file. Oh, frabjous day! He rose unsteadily to his feet and wavered across the room.

For the last time, Thaar spoke to Earth.

"Bill!" it repeated desperately. "Surely all human beings can't be like you!"

Bill turned and looked into the swirling tunnel. Strange — it seemed to be lit with flecks of star-

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light, and was really rather pretty. He felt proud of himself: not many people could imagine *that*.

"Like me?" he said. "No, they're not." He smiled smugly across the light-years, as the rising tide of euphoria lifted him out of his despondency. "Come to think of it," he added, "there are a lot of people much worse off than me. Yes, I guess I must be one of the lucky ones, after all."

He blinked in mild surprise, for the tunnel had suddenly collapsed upon itself and the whitewashed wall was there again, exactly as it had always been. Thaar knew when it was beaten.

"So much for that hallucination," thought Bill. "Let's see what the next one's like."

As it happened, there wasn't a next one, for five seconds later he passed out cold, just as he was setting the combination of the file cabinet.

The next two days were rather vague and bloodshot, and he forgot all about the interview.

On the third day something was nagging at the back of his mind: he might have remembered if Brenda hadn't turned up again and kept him busy being forgiving.

And there wasn't a fourth day, of course.

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READERS' BOOK SERVICE

Below is a list of many of the most important science fiction books of the past year which you may now order postpaid through F&SF. In addition, you may order any hard-cover book reviewed in this magazine during the past year. (Sorry, but we cannot offer this service on paper-bound books.)

NOVELS

94 THE END OF ETERNITY
Isaac Asimov
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Fredric Brown
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Arthur C. Clarke
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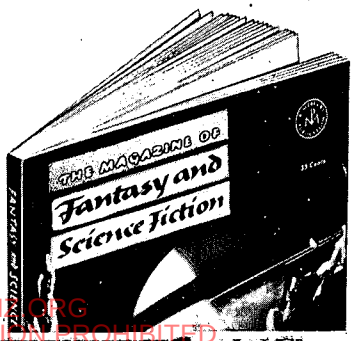

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